

# Proving Yourself

by CrimsonMaiden

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Summary: After Hiccup becomes chief, things have changed not just in Berk, but also in his relationships. Astrid spends more time with Eret, Hiccup is insecure, Berk needs a chief with heir. Will Hiccup and Astrid stand together? Or will having a strong alliance between tribes change their future plans as a couple?

## 1. Out of Place

\*\*(AN: Hey guys, CrimsonMaiden here, this is my very first fanfiction ever... So forgive me if its a bit bad or some so. Also, if there is grammar issues, I am writing and publishing it while having a cold so, imagine that. lol anyways, I would definitely appreciate your feedback. I wanted to start the story taking point when Battle with Drago ended and wrote a story on how things have gone after that glorious day. Which is why I began the story with those last few lines of the HTTYD2 movie scenes. I OWE NOTHING of HTTYD, I am just a writer that has some imagination on her favorite movie characters and ONLY write this for your entertainment. If you truly want me to continue the story, please review and ask for so. I won't write for ghosts. Thanks and enjoy :D) \*\*

\* \* \*

><p>"You never cease to amaze me, bud." Hiccup admiringly said as he approached his best friend, rested both hands over the reptile's wide, black head and caringly caressed it.<p>

Toothless snorted before slipping out his massive moisten tongue and bathed the boy with his sticky dragon saliva, having Hiccup lose his balance and fall flat on the ground. Laughing, no doubt, "Ah, Toothless! You know that doesn't wash out!"

Everyone around them started laughing. Joyfully, knowing that they could effectively do so in peace now that they have won the dragon battle against Drago. To them, this meant that they could finally

regain their usual lives and dragons once more, or at least...that's what they thought until they realized how damaged the village was after Drago's attack. Nearly covered in ice spikes and many houses rumbled down to the now unstable grounds. They knew their joyful moments would last shortly.

Once Toothless finally decided to halt his game on Hiccup, the boy crawled himself back up and took a long, admiring glance to his surroundings wanting to take a strong glimpse of his homeland and the people who lives there. He wanted to make sure no one was hurt. Then, he saw how all dragons found their beloved rider. Enjoying the sight of it, his eyes searched for a particular figure throughout the whole crowd and all the ice obstacles that made his sight much more complicated.

Recklessly, his eyes searched and searched without a sign of giving up on finding what he was looking for, until his ears alarmed his eyes with the sound of one of his favorite laughter, lighting up his thoughts. He heard her laugh, not so far from him, but not quite reachable. And still, he heard her. He would undoubtedly recognize her voice even through a fierce storm. Simply, because that sweet, adventurous and determined voice had always drove him insane.

As his eyes landed and followed how that particular figure skipped, excitedly reaching out an arm to her dragon which happily landed before her, Astrid grabbed Stormfly and embraced her head as much as her slender arms could reach around the colorful female beast. Snuggling together, looking just like a lost daughter relieved that she had at last found her mother.

"...Oh, come give me a cuddle Grumpy!" Goober exclaimed with his arms wide open, catching Hiccup's attention and a hefty squash as Grumpy happily landed on him.

Hiccup laughed. Not really helping it. After the twins, Snotlout and Fishlegs reunited with their own dragons, Eret bonded with Skullcrusher and Valka promised to never leave Berk again. Hiccup was about to say something when he caught his mother glance away, his eyes landed on the one he never thought would reach out on that hectic day, slowly walk towards him, slightly nodding at Valka in respect for interrupting but quickly focusing on her man.

>"See?" Astrid rhetorically asked Hiccup as she halted right before him and laid a hand gently on his chest, "Told you it was in here..."<p>

Just when he warmly smiled at her and began to slowly lean towards her in search for a kiss, the sneaky Viking pulled on one of his flight suit modifications, making his manmade fins immediately spread out from his suit.

All three of them laughed, Hiccup rolled his eyes and swayed a bit away and caught her off guard by snaking an arm around her waist and pulling her tightly against him.

"Come here you," forgetting that they were right in the middle of a suddenly silenced crowd, his lips pressed against hers, Astrid didn't hesitate in pushing hers back against his in response, knowing that he wouldn't settle down until she claimed his lips hers

again.

But...that was just \_two\_ \_months\_ \_ago\_.

Battle against Drago, finding Valka, losing Stoick, Eret learning how to bond with the dragons instead of desiring to trap them all the time, Hiccup becoming chief, Astrid teasing him in the middle of work to join her into the Dragon Race, beginning the construction and restoring Berk, all that...was just two months ago. And it kept on, though. Berk was finally taking a nice form with all the help from dragons and Vikings, especially now that apparently, new dragons came and went every once in a while.

Hiccup had to let Astrid take complete charge over the Dragon Academy. Fishlegs would be the second in command and he would take her place if she was needed elsewhere.â€"which was basically almost every day at some point.

Eret, was asked to split his day duties in half. From sunrise till midday, he was to help with the construction and using Skullcrusher to get rid of as many ice peaks as they could in a day. Then, from midday to sunset, he would report himself straight to the Academy so he could train with Skullcrusher and become a better rider.

All in one, no one ever thought on how innocent expectations could get into a light twist over time.

That evening, Hiccup called a night for all of the constructions. He ordered everyone to gather into the Mead Hall and have a dinner rest to regain their spiritual energies. Simply laugh and have a nice while for a few hours before sleep time and a new laboring, endless day.

Yet, one of his reasons to call it a night so early, before sunset, was to spend a while with his long lost mother, who he hadn't seen since like...never and whom just decided to stay along in Berk, with him, now even more than ever since they had just lost one precious jewel in their life, a father and a husband. Although at times, Hiccup may feel a slight threat of guilt trying to disturb his peace-of-mind, he would always try to shake it off by spending a while with either Toothless or Valka. Even time with the twins may work at timesâ€"as crazy as that may soundâ€".

"No way!" Ruffnut snarled as she slammed her mug on the table disrupting Hiccup's concentration in his meal. He glanced up at her, who was sitting across the table, Tuffnut on her right side, Fishlegs on her left.

"What is it now?" Hiccup asked with a mouth-full not really helping looking at her with restless eyes.

"Ugh, \_she\_, is babbling about how mister \_I-am-way-better-looking-than-you\_ is always having the best fun around the woods and never think of inviting her in." Tuffnut said while signaling his twin with his thumb.

Hiccup rose an eyebrow. When he swallowed his food, he finally asked, "Uh, what exactly are you talking about?" Not really knowing whether Tuffnut's word selection was even coherent or not.

"I think what he means is, that Eret, son of Eret gets to ride Skullcrusher for an extended predetermined time while we have to ditch our dragons to work on the construction." Fishlegs explained pointing up his index finger.

"Guys, he trains at noon." Hiccup said.

"Correction, he is having fun at noon." Snotlout said as he walked towards their table holding a plate with two fat salmons and a chicken drumstick in one hand and a mug in the other. He settled his food on the table beside Hiccup and got comfortable.

"He is, and not specifically with me." Ruffnut muttered.

"Does anything any of you are saying make sense? Can someone please speak clear enough?" Hiccup began feeling as if he was beginning to lose on his patience.

"Well, it would be easier to understand if he would help more on the village than flying off to the unseen with her. Just because he has a tattoo beard, geesh, what is it with you women?" Snotlout complained while waving his drumstick side to side.

Hiccup was even more confused now. So he just stared at them all, waiting for a clearer answer. Showing off how irritated he was beginning to feel with their babble.

Fishlegs startled himself when he could finally read Hiccup's expression and with a trembling voice, he responded, "Oh, he's talking about Astrid."

Hiccup pulled himself back and raised an eyebrow. He hadn't heard her name in weeks, he barely sees her now and if they exchange any word or share a conversation, it wouldn't last any longer than a few seconds as it mostly has to do with exchanging duties during the day. Nothing close to what or how a couple should behave with one another. He missed her, dearly, but he also knew that he had duties and she too. Yet, the times he'd plan to surprise her with a visit, something would come up. Being chief was getting beginning to get in between his relationship with both Astrid and Toothless. But Toothless was different, he lived with Hiccup and he was also the one who helped him take over the hefty situations in construction. So Hiccup could find some time to talk with his best friend while working as well.

He surely didn't expect to hear her name now, especially not on this kind of conversation.

"What about Astrid?" Hiccup asked, sounding much more uncomfortable than what he expected to be.

"Oh wow, you don't know?!" Tuffnut asked surprised. "Astrid spends her evenings with Eret now. They fly off overseas together after class in the Academy is over."

Hiccup relaxed his shoulders, sighed and rolled his eyes, "Guys, I asked her to train him with Skullcrusher."

"Yeah, but why can't he train with the others during the day at the Academy?" Ruffnut asked.

"Because we are talking about \_Skullcrusher\_. My late dad's dragon being trained by a man who believed himself to be a dragon trapper all his life. Does that ring any kind of bell to you?"

"Uh, no. All bells already rang two hours ago, dinner time is almost done." Tuffnut answered with his mouth vaguely open.

Hiccup let out a strong, exasperating sigh. They've grown up together and he still can't believe how stupid these two might get.

"Yeah but that's not the point, Hiccup," Fishlegs carefully added, "Some have seen Astrid act as if she was somehow possessed by a happy spirit lately, especially when she is hanging around Eret and others say they have seen her out in the river with him."

"Yeah and it's weird to see Astrid all happy and blissful all the time." Ruffnut added.

"Kinda \_creepy\_, actually." Tuffnut mumbled to his sister.

"So? The rivers are full of fish." Hiccup shrugged. "And you've all seen her acting all excited and cheerful even before meeting Eret."

"We're still not used to it, though." Tuffnut muttered again.

"Do you seriously think they will go out to the rivers all by themselves just to catch some fish?" Snotlout asked rhetorically shaking his head.

"And are you saying, that \_my\_ future bride is doing inappropriate stuff with a new rider, Snotlout?" Hiccup glared. He didn't realize how angry he was beginning to sound until every Viking near them fell silence and stared at the table where their chief was sitting along with the usual others that always sat with him.

That was when Hiccup glanced slightly over him and noticed he might have spilled just a bit louder than what he was supposed to.

Snotlout didn't seem to care, he answered right away, with a careless shrug, "How can you be so sure that she's \_your\_ bride anymore, Hiccup? You barely even talk."

"Technically, it is only natural that if a woman isn't well attended by her man, she will find refuge on some other." Tuffnut said.

Everyone rose a brow at him, "Um, actually, that \_is\_ true." Fishlegs agreed.

Hiccup snarled within him and stood drastically up from his seat, "I've heard enough." He muttered before taking in a deep breath and clenching his teeth. Then, he walked himself out of Mead Hall.

It weren't the rumors that got him off his good judgment, it was the way his friends talked so carelessly. As if they didn't know Astrid, as if they didn't know her \_at\_ \_all\_. They all knew how fearless and determined she was, heck, Astrid was known as the best \_young\_ female

dragon rider in all the northern hemisphere."After Valka, of course". Plus, she was also known as the best female warrior Berk has ever had so far.

She wouldn't let anyone take advantage of her, she knew better than that...\_Hiccup\_ knew better than that"

Yet, it wasn't that easy to remember when you've been busy all the time with many things haunting your head restlessly and then hear that your future wife might be having a slip-off somewhere else. It could be a low shot from Hiccup to believe that though, it would mean that he hardly trusted her.

But at this point, he was confused. He didn't know what to think exactly or how to react. He just wanted to do what he had longed ever since they last kissed in front of all Berk, he wanted to see her...he \_needed\_ to see her.

His feet were leading him towards her house. By this time, she \_should\_ be home.

"Hiccup!" Valka yelled from a distance, running towards him with a wide smile tattooed on her lips as she saw him, though, when she finally approached him, her smile faded as she noticed his worked up expression.

"What's wrong son?" She asked, laying a hand on his cheek. He shook his head, taking an absent step back,

"I'm looking for Astrid. Have you seen her?"

"Oh, no, I haven't. But I was just talking to her mother, she said Astrid was on her way home when she last saw her about an hour ago."

"Thanks," Hiccup breathed out, "I'll see you later. Sorry mom, gotta go."

Not giving Valka a change to answer, Hiccup was already running towards Astrid's house. The sight of an unexpected image before his eyes halted him just a few feet from the entrance. Stormfly was sleeping in her hut, snuggling against Skullcrusher who rose his neck when he saw Hiccup.

Might be a good thing \_Toothless\_ wasn't around to see this, otherwise he might have felt steamed up for seeing his friend sleeping happily beside a dragon that wasn't either himself since she rarely sleeps accompanied unless it was by Astrid, Hiccup or Toothless himself.

Hiccup didn't want to think beyond what his eyes were seeing, he \_shouldn't\_...if Skullcrusher was here, then it meant \_Fret\_ was too.

He just smiled faintly at the dragon, knowing that if he gets closer, he might wake Stormfly up. So he just walked on to the house.

Knocked three times against the front door. No one answered. Knocked twice, again. Nothing.

He was starting to get impatient, so he searched his insides for the spare key Astrid had given him for emergencies only. His exasperation grew even thicker when he couldn't find the key as quick as he hoped for, then thought of searching on the inner-left pocket of his tunic and finally took a hold of it. At the light touch of the key against the door lock, the door moved open.

The door was open...

So he slowly opened it further and peaked his head in, just in case he saw someone, then, walked in, closed the door behind him and looked around...

To be continued.

## 2. Desirous

The first floor was lifeless. No one around was seen, heard or even felt. The only lighting in the room was the fire vivid in the fireplace at Hiccup's right corner. The dining table was a mess, though. There were two big mugs, "nearly the size of Gobber's favorite one" one was facing up and the other was laid down beside. Hiccup noticed that both mugs were completely empty. The big bottle of ale was also empty and laid on the floor, hardly dripping on the wooden grounds beneath it.

\_Was she drinking? \_

\_Wait\_, Hiccup thought, "If no one is down here, there are signs someone might have just gotten drunk, then that \_means\_" He didn't even allowed his faded voice finish the sentence as his eyes quickly glanced over the staircase. He cleared his throat and carefully walked toward the stairs, sending silent prayers that his bad expectations were to be completely false.

"Ah, Hiccup," A whisper called to him, making his steps halt their movement in the very middle of the stairs. His head glanced up, spotting \_Eret\_ at the very top, looking utterly surprised at his chief.

"Gee, I'm glad you're here. I was about to go find you." Eret whispered while climbing down the stairs and stopping a step over Hiccup.

"What happened?" Was all he could ask or say.

He was whispering, of course. But it seemed like his voice emitted some kind of discomfort. So much, that Eret blinked in wonder and then moved out of his chief's way. "She fell asleep while drinking. I took her to her room." Eret rose a hand over the back of his head and scratched it absently, "Or, what I \_believe\_ it is her bedchamber. All rooms in this house seem the same to me."

Eret released a shameless, silent laughter and relaxed his shoulders for once.

"Did you drink a lot?" Hiccup faintly asked.

"Well, yeah. But I told her not to pass on the number of servings she would pour into her mug but then I just learned you couldn't possibly make Astrid do something she doesn't want to. I nearly lost my head to my neck." As he said the last word, he rubbed on his neck before shrugging it off.

Hiccup couldn't help but to slightly smile at the thought of an angry and drunk Astrid. Not the best combination, though. It was always best to keep her sober, no matter how angry and fierce she might get at times.

"Well um, anyway, I'll leave you to it." Eret said rather uncomfortable by Hiccups deep silence and finished his trail of steps.

"Eret," Hiccup called from the stairs, "Thanks."

This time, his voice was softer and much friendlier than previously. Eret faintly smirked, nodded on his head once as response, walked out the door, silently closed it behind him and soon after, Hiccup heard Skullcrusher's wings flapping outside.

Hiccup had been scanning Eret from top to bottom. Searching for clues he didn't even mean to be searching for. Eret's hair was a bit messy, but his clothes were perfectly lined on his body. This only confused the poor chief much more. Yet, his heart was stumping so loud and hard that it suddenly began aching in his chest.

When Hiccup finally reached Astrid's room, he slowly opened the door. Slid himself in, closed the door behind him and glanced all over the place. The room was neatly cleaned and the only light defying the evening's darkness, was a small candlelit by her bed.

She was the last thing his eyes landed on. As he walked toward her, trying as hard as he could not to make any noise that might wake her up and then stood right by her.

She was laying on her back. Covered from toes to neck. Her eyes were red, and lips a little swollen. Rosy cheeks and messy braid.

Had she been crying? Hiccup wondered.

No, Astrid never cries. This should be just part of her drunken state.

Yet, his heart continued banging against his chest, calling to be ripped off for once and all as his body temperature rose with each second that passed by.

For a moment, all the reasons why he might have felt a bit worked up, faded away. Just with watching her sleep, peacefully, it brought peace in him as well. Her face looked like perfect porcelain, but something in her seemed rather uncomfortable. For her brows were slightly frowning and relaxing, frowning and relaxing, frowning and relaxing again and again. That was when he noticed she was sleeping in a way she undoubtedly disliked.

Hiccup chuckled for himself, "How dumb of him, you can't sleep like that."



That said, Hiccup took a hold of her fur covers, inhaled deeply and removed the them, exposing her clothed body. This prove to him, that she did nothing while being in her house with Eret. Which somehow relieved him up to some point. Astrid didn't even shudder when he removed the covers from her. So he kneeled by her feet and slowly took a boot off her foot, placed it on the floor by the bed and then took the other off, placing it beside the other boot.

The young chief then slowly stood up and unbuckled Astrid's spiked skirt. She must be truly asleep if she isn't feeling me take her clothes off. He thought. Or maybe she just drank too much to even feel anything at all.

With a hand, he lifted her lower back and quickly removed the skirt with the other. Folded the skirt and laid it over a table by the window. When he came back to her, he noticed how Astrid had turned over on the bed and was now laying on her stomach. Moving her arms underneath her pillow, searching for a comfortable pose.

Hiccup smiled, rolled his eyes and leaned to slide her jacket off. Untangling her arms beneath her, careful not to wake her up. When he finally got the jacket, he hung it on the hanger by her door. Walking back to her, he grabbed a hold of the fur covers and gently threw them over her, up till the top of her neck. Leaving her in her leggings, socks, and red tunic.

Finally, he sat right by her side. Only desiring to watch her sleep. He'd known how she liked to sleep, and she'd know his ways. They have stayed out together many times and spent nights out in the woods after an adventurous flight, at the twin's house whenever they had a gathering there, at Meade Hall when they stayed with the rest of their small group at stormy times just in case someone needed some assistance, and so many other times. But that was just years and months ago.

Seeing her from a closer distance, felt much more relieving than glancing over to get a small glimpse of her from afar while they worked. It turned out oh-so-differently now. At last, he can have her this close without any interruptions of any kind. But...she's now peacefully sleeping.

His hand absently wandered over the covers and up to her cheek, caressing it twice before taking his hand up to her braid. Following the curves of it, until he reached down to the Pony-O-Ring that held it firm and strong together. Taking the ring off, his fingers began to tangle themselves in her braids, unbraiding her golden, soft hair.

Enjoying every touch, every second he spent just eyeing her beauty. Oh, how much he had missed his girl. He never realized they would ever grow apart by simply being busy every day and night. It was precisely what he wanted to avoid, slipping away from her.

He'd grown so used to asking her every single day to join him and Toothless on their flights that making the map seemed lonely and weird without her company.

Their ways of dating. Simply spending time one near the other, was considered a nice date by them, as long as they are alone or with their dragons.

It's also been time since he last saw her race on Stormfly. He perfectly remembered last time they all raced together. She had startled him and Toothless and then he decided to get a little payback. So he joined the race right at the final lap. Since he knew Snotlout and Fishlegs were giving the sheep off to Ruffnut, Hiccup wanted to play unfair as well and took the black sheep before Stormfly would catch it and threw it down into his beloved's basket instead of his own. He thought that if everyone was going to ditch the rules, then why not him too?

Soon, her hair was completely loosened and her curls draped over her back, looking like a peaceful goddess enjoying her rest.

"Only I want to see your hair like this." He whispered to her while carefully running his fingers through her long curls until they reached her mid-back and then back up. "I'd get terribly jealous if other men see you without your braids. Or less clothes."

Chuckles, "Stupid of me to think like that, right?" He sighed, "Well, at least you're the one sleeping now. That way I can get back home without a bruised arm." Mutters the last.

Hiccup took in a deep breath, slowly let it out, realizing it was far too late. Probably past midnight already, as the full moon shone so bright through Astrid's room that her reflection caressed the Viking woman's pale face, making her look like she was somehow glowing.

This only made Hiccup wish to stay far longer, with her. Making sure she would wake up alright in the morning and to assist her if she needed anything. He would do all that, if he wasn't chief. He would do all that, if he hadn't had so many duties the next morning starting off before sunrise.

He'd stay and wait for her to wake up so he could ask if anything truly happened between her and Eret. To ask if she felt any better. To tell her about his terribly exhausting day. But he couldn't. He had to go. Fearing that next time he might see her up this close could be in another two months,

Hiccup removed some strands of hair from her face, leaned forward and gently planted his dry lips over her cheek.

Allowing the kiss to last more than just two or three seconds, before pulling back and then stood back up. Feeling his heart beginning to pound much faster once again, Hiccup silently started walking across her room.

"Don't go!" that small, weak whisper halted him right by the door, with a hand already gripping on the knob. His head glanced over his shoulder, seeing her in the same position as he had left her. The only difference, was that her eyes were wide open, and staring right at him.

Hiccup couldn't find words to spread through his lips and simply stared at her. Astrid pushed herself up and removed the covers from half of her bed. Inviting him in.

"Stay." She said.

"I have to go back."

"Just for a while, Hiccup."

"Butâ€|"

"\_Please\_," She didn't let him finish. She knew what he was about to say. "I know tomorrow is another busy day, but please stay."

Astrid \_pleading\_ him to stayâ€| that was terribly unlike her, or at least not what people who knew her ways would expect for her to ever do. But Hiccup \_did\_ expect that. They had grown so close to each other that she has seen and comforted his weaknesses as much as he had seen and enjoyed her softness with him. Which was indeed, \_just\_ \_with\_ \_him\_. In secret. Alone.

The Astrid Hiccup came to know throughout the years, was one only he had the privilege to enjoy. It was like a side of her no one was ever allowed to discover. And yet, Hiccup possessed the only key to it.

So he didn't protest. Instead, he let go of the doorknob and walked toward her bed, laid on her side and helped her drape the covers over his body to keep himself warm for a while.

"My mom will get mad at me for staying here. And yours too." He whispered, turning to face her.

She was still staring up at him. Enjoying every inch of his visible body. Hardly believing that this was all real, that she had finally had him \_close\_ after so much time. She knew that if this was a dreamâ€"one of all the many she'd had about him being this close to her againâ€" then she had to keep this it as vivid as possible for the longest period of time.

"I don't \_care\_." Was all she could say.

Hiccup chuckled and leaned to kiss her nose, but she quickly moved so that her lips touched his own. He opened his eyes in surprise, but didn't pull back nor hesitate. His hand gently moved to rest on her neck, his thumb absently rubbing on her jawline as his lips pushed against her own in response.

Their blood boiled. Cheeks reddened by the second and it certainly wasn't because of the usual cold that draped over Berk. Her hand slowly snaked over his arm, holding it close so he wouldn't pull his hand back from his hold on her face. She loved it whenever he touched her cheeks as they kissed. It brought a beautiful and simply enhancing feeling throughout her body.

Soon, Astrid grew tired of touching \_just\_ his lips and poked on them with her tongue. Asking them to take her in. Hoping to feel his cold and moisten tongue make delicate love to her own, but then Hiccup broke their kiss and pulled away from her face, looking right at her.

"Astrid, I have to go." He whispered.

Her eyes stayed closed, her hand gripped on his arm and her leg

quickly snaked over his own, trapping his prosthetic leg in her own. Then, her eyes finally opened to look up at him.

Hiccup chuckled, "Don't start."

"Don't start what?"

"Playing like that."

"You like it."

"Not when you know I have duties to fulfil."

"What part of staying over, don't you understand, Hiccup?"

Hiccup frowned at her. This was enough for her. She glared back at him for a quick second and then freed his leg. Her hand then traveled from his arm to his jawline and made her fingers gracefully dance over his now manly facial features. "I haven't seen you this close in a while. We have the chance to stay and rest together and you won't take it?"

"It's not that I don't want to take it, Astrid. First off, your mom should be here by now. Second, I cannot simply leave my mother all by herself in my house when she surely should be waiting for me and third, I have to be at the forge right before sunrise."

Astrid's eyes fell to his chest. Where did she fit in all that?

His voice wasn't sweet as usual when with her now, it was harsh and restless. Still a whisper, though.

She then she slowly began to feel like she had no rights to halt him or get between his tight schedule as chief. So she just nodded and allowed her hand fall from his skin once he wiggled away from her hold and stood back up.

"I'll see you around."

Was that it? That sounded more like how you talk to any other peep. Not to Astrid. Worst of all, he didn't even look at her as he covered her body again with the furs and turned his back on her to stretch himself a bit.

She could start a fight. She should throw the candlelit at him and care less if he catches on fire. But at this point, Astrid didn't find the strengths to fight him. Not after seeing him up so close after a long while. She knew that a worked up Hiccup could result in an explosive dialogue that could mean both heartache and heartbreak to both of them and that night, Astrid wasn't just feeling like going for it. So she just stared at him as he blew out the candle and letting the moonlight be his guide, she watched how he disappeared from her room.

"Am I nothing to him now?" she asked in a low voice, at an empty room.

### 3. Breath Away

"Due to previously scheduled events, today's class will be suspended. I'm sure you'll all be needed elsewhere today so I believe there won't be a problem with that." Astrid announced while standing in the middle of the arena as the students of the academy circled around her.

"Poor axe..." Tuffnut sighed, "If it were alive, it would be screaming to death by now."

"And you call me stupid?" Ruffnut barked back.

"I am more surprised by how she hasn't shown any sign of her hand throbbing by the way she's been holding that axe. So firm. Seems painful." Fishlegs whispered to them.

"What she needs, is some manly love." Snotlout wiggled his brows.

"Quiet you four!" Astrid hissed, pointing at the four of them with her axe and stabbing a sharp gaze at each of them. "If you have anything to say that could benefit us all before leaving," She switched from clenching her teeth to deviously smirk as she relaxed her arm and rested her fist on her hip "Please, don't hesitate to share." Of course, she was teasing. She just wanted them to stop babbling, it had driven her mad since the moment she set foot on the arena that morning.

"Well, gladly!" Snotlout proudly said, ignoring Fishleg's sudden alarmed expression, shaking his head in denial at Snotlout as if that would actually stop him from spilling out words he shouldn't. "We all think you are in need of a little cuddle-wuddle here and I am mostly proud to say I am available to assist you madam."

Astrid glared as he slowly approached her.

Close enough to be considered as an invasion of her precious personal space and she took a stronghold on his wrist, twisted it backwards and stomped on his kneecaps so he could lose his balance and fall flat on the ground. Then, she rested a foot on his chest and trapped his neck in her axe.

"Class, is dismissed." She hissed, staring straight at Snotlout. Everyone else got the message far clearer than expected and soon the academy grounds were completely deserted.

"Uh, Astrid?" Fishlegs timidly called, taking one tiny step after the other towards her, at some point having a war in his own mind on whether it was a good idea to approach her or not "Now might not be the right time to relieve your endless furies with Snotlout. Remember we have a lot to do before sunset."

Astrid pulled herself back at the sound of that and gave Snotlout a deadly glare before stepping off of him and glancing back up at the skies, "No, you have a lot to do before sunset, here in Berk. I have other things waiting for me." Humorless, she replied as she watched Stormfly stomp behind her.

In less than a second, Astrid had already climbed up on her dragon

and glanced at the clear blue skies, as if she was somehow studying them for a quick minute.

"Wait, where are you going? You can't be late tonight, Astrid!" By the time Fishlegs yelled and tried to get a hold of her, Astrid and Stormfly were already flying off over the mountains.

"You don't think she would actually miss on the feast, do you?" Tuffnut asked.

"I sure hope not. If she does, Hiccup might get truly angry at her. He and Stoick had been working on this for months." Fishlegs responded.

"Uh, no. He won't be mad at her, he'll be mad at us!" Ruffnut pointed out.

"Exactly. Hiccup specifically instructed us to keep Astrid in grounds today." Fishlegs shivered.

"I don't think that's called in grounds." Snotlout said as he stood up from the ground and then pointed at the skies to where Astrid had just flown off to. "By the way," He suddenly turned to Ruffnut and began swaying slowly side to side, "Have I ever told you how beautiful you sound whenever you try to remember things, babe?"

"Ugh, don't start so early in the morning." Ruffnut barfed her words as she stepped backwards, trying to recover her tiny personal space "You'll make me get sick."

"Hm, sick of love, my dear?" Snotlout grinned.

"Shut up, Snotlout!" Fishlegs hissed. "Just a few seconds ago, you were flirting on Astrid. Remember that?"

Snotlout snorted, "I'm a manly man, Fishlegs. I can have as many women as I want."

"Firstly, when you speak, try to make sure you don't repeat your words on the same sentence. If you are going to use the word manly, then don't follow with man for manly stands primarily for qualities a man has. You don't need to be speaking nonsense."

Snotlout rose a brow and then began rubbing on his forehead. "Ugh, the only one speaking nonsense here is you. Quit torturing my precious brain!"

"You don't have one..." Fishlegs mumbled to himself.

"Anyway!" Tuffnut interrupted, probably in time to prevent a love-triangle fightâ€|\_again\_.

"Back to today's to-dos'. Fishlegs said Hiccup and Stoick had been planning on today's day for months now...right?"

Fishlegs glanced at the twin, "Yeah, so?"

"Well, aren't things supposed to change since Stoick is umâ€|\_you\_

\_know\_â€|flying with ducks now? Tuffnut pointed out, his mouth vaguely open, again.

"Still, this is something Stoick wanted, which would make it even harder for Hiccup not to follow his wishes." Fishlegs answered.

The twins and Snotlout stared wordlessly at Fishlegs, making him sigh in surrender and signal the exit with his beefy arm, "Never mind, just go get everything ready. I'll try to find Hiccup."

It was evident that neither Snotlout nor the twins had an idea of what Fishlegs was saying, so he decided not to keep on trying and went out to search for his chief. Besides, trying to get the twins and Snotlout to reason was like getting a yak dancing in the middle of a field.

\* \* \*

><p>"Being late, bah! Who said I'd be late?" Astrid asked, basically talking to herself since she was still riding Stormfly "I won't even bother go back there tonight. I'll do whatever <em>I<em> want for once. Least thing I want is to see any familiar face today."

Stormfly squawked in wonder as she listened to her rider muttering to herself.

Astrid seemed to have noticed Stormfly's concerned stare and just sighed, leaning over and rubbing on the dragon's side of neck, "Don't worry, girl. It's not you I'm steamed up with. We'll spend the entire day together, just you and me. For once, we will forget everything that is tormenting usâ€|"

Stormfly seemed to have enjoyed very much the sound of that as she squawked again, proudly speeding up.

Astrid laughed, slightly relaxing her shoulders "You like that, huh?"

Stormfly made a quick spin before squawking twice in joy.

Astrid just rolled her eyes while smirking before glancing down at the forest beneath them. "Stormfly, land." She instructed, pointing at a spot near a pond.

Without hesitating, Stormfly slowed down and soon they were descending until she landed on a boulder. Astrid jumped off her dragon and wrapped her arms around her massive head, embracing her as much as she could and cuddled her. "Good girl!"

Walking around, Astrid smirked as she saw how well the trees surrounded them to the point of thinking that it'd be quite difficult to be found in there. Which was basically her point, to take this particular day to escape and just have some time for herself and her dragon without having to see another Viking face for long hours. She wanted to breathe in the fresh oaks, the sweetened scent the breeze carried along, the sound of the small cascade falling and having a harsh contact with the calm rivers beneath it.

Suddenly, her foot stepped on a dry, big and thick branch. She leaned

forward and took a firm hold of it. "Stormfly?"

The dragon stopped her drinking from the river to glance over at her rider in wonder, Astrid smirked, "Wanna play?"

Stormfly didn't even hesitate. She was immediately skipping toward Astrid and lowered her head a bit, signaling that she was ready.

Astrid took her axe off her armor and placed it on a cluster near her before relaxing her arms and positioning herself to throw the branch, "Stormflyâ€¦fetch!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Aah, it really feels amazing up here. I might be beginning to understand what Hiccup and Astrid always babble about what's so great of flying off with your dragon." Eret said to himself as he breathed in the fresh outdoor air. Instead of taking it all in through his nostrils.<p>

He had his mouth wide open until something banged against his throat, making him cough endlessly, slamming his fist against his chest, eyes already beginning to get watery, the harsh wind not helping at all as Skullcrusher slightly growled.

"Gags! Can'tâ€¦" coughs "â€¦c-canâ€¦" coughs "â€¦assist youâ€¦" coughs "â€¦now!"

The coughs grew louder and rougher until he spit a large, dense and greenish discharge with a tiny fly trapped within all the mucus.

"Ah," He cleaned it off on his fur trousers "That's better." Pulled himself back together, smirked and licked on his lips before hearing Skullcrusher growl once again and start descending. "Huh? Wh-where are you taking us?"

No wonder, Eret was kind of crept out by his dragon's sudden change of course. Of course, he was still trying to get the hang of things when it comes to \_riding\_ \_a\_ \_dragon\_. One of the essential lessons Hiccup and Astrid were trying to make him understand, was to learn how to trust in his dragon and let it take the lead every once in a while. Eret, being a man fond of making his own decisions final and not let anyone get between such, it was a bit difficult to let go of that side of him.

Luckily for him, the times Skullcrusher had decided on their course for them, weren't at all that bad. Seemed like the dragon was one of pure respect and law.

\_Well, he was Stoick's loyal companionâ€¦\_ no wonder.\_

"Well look at that!" Eret exclaimed victoriously as he saw Astrid laying on her back by the river, rubbing on Stormfly's chin as the dragon's head happily waved over the girl's body.

At the sound of someone else's voice disrupting her precious moments with her dragon, Astrid moved her head to the side to take a good look at the intruder. "What are \_you\_ doing here?"



"Skullcrusher found you." Eret proudly said as he climbed off the massive beast and petted his horn.

Astrid glared at them as she supported her weight on her elbows, "You were \_tracking\_ me down?"

"Not really, but my chief would certainly be glad to see I won't go back home all empty handed." He fixed on his fur vest and slid a hand through his hair, ordering any strand out of place.

"I'm not going anywhere \_with\_ \_you\_." Astrid hissed.

"Geesh, so much for a bad attitude." Eret huffed and walked past her, sitting on the nearest boulder. "I'm just joking around, Astrid."

Astrid didn't say a word, she just watched him closely.

"What I will ask you is, where have you been all day?"

Astrid blinked, then looked at her surroundings a little clueless, "Has it been \_all\_ \_day\_ already?" she asked.

Then, her eyes answered her own question at the sight of the sun setting on one of the mountains at her west side. Seems like she's been successfully distracted. So much, yet hours went by far too fast.

"By the looks on your face, it appears to me that you haven't had a good track of time." Eret pointed out while staring at her.

Astrid sat back up, her bare feet sunk in the water as her toes began absently playing with it. "Right."

Eret blinked, trying to find words to build a nice conversation with her, "So," he scratched the back of his head, "I've heard people are looking for you back in the village."

"They are?" Her voice sounded careless and she still hadn't bothered to even look back at him.

"Yeah, I was even asked to search for you, but the hours went by and I just gave up."

"You wouldn't be the first one to give up." She muttered.

"Huh?"

She sighed, "Never mind. Besides, dinner time already started so they'll probably stop searching."

"You won't go back for dinner?"

"No."

Eret blinked in confusion, then glanced on his side to take a look at the axe resting beside him. It was a little bigger than what he remembered and its handle was covered in black leather. "This, seems

quite differentâ€¦"

Astrid glanced back over her shoulder and chuckled, "That's not \_my\_ axe." She admitted "It's my mother's."

"Oh." He noticed the axe was much bigger than Astrid's and the metal was a little more damaged than her own which was usually well refined and polished. Then he remembered, that he had heard rumors that Hiccup usually polished Astrid's axe every three days without failing. Making sure her axe was always on its best conditions. Making sure it was always worthy of its holder.

"So, why are you carrying your mother's axe?"

"I can't find mine."

"Really?!" Eret asked surprised and rubbed on his chin in wonder, "That's oddâ€¦" he mumbled, knowing Astrid rarely leaves her axe out of sight. Yet, how \_many\_ \_more\_ things did he know about her?

He then chuckled, "So, will you tell me why have you been missing all day and why won't you join the others for dinner as usual?"

"I just don't want to, okay?" her voice began sounding quite irritating. But Eret was quite known to irritate others with curious and everlasting quests. He wasn't feeling like giving up \_just\_ \_yet\_.

"Okay, but don't you think you should at least eat something?"

"We already ate."

"Hm, seems like you sure do know how to survive on your own, don't you?"

"Pretty much." Astrid jumped up from her spot and stood up straight, walking to the bonfire just a few feet from her and stretched out her hands to warm herself. Waiting for the heat and breeze to dry her wet, bare feet.

"Still, I believe you should go back."

"If you'll be talking about the things I should and shouldn't do, then I would suggest you to \_leave\_ as soon as possible." Astrid hissed, reminding him that she \_wasn't\_ a woman of being told what to do.

"Alright, alright. I won't say a word, then." Eret waved his arms up in surrender and then let out a helpless laughter, making Astrid relax her lips into a slight smile at his movements.

She crossed her legs, her knees against her chest. Taking a hold of the nearest dry branch and starting to poking on the fire with it while resting her chin on her knees. Allowing her eyes to get lost in the going and fading fire.

Silence took over them. For long hours. Who'd thought that two people could be utterly silence in the very same place for so long?

Both, Skullcrusher and Stormfly were already soundly sleeping by the

fire. Astrid's eyes were beginning to grow tired and Eret was growing immensely bored. He just had to say something or he would probably just die out of exasperation. He had never been alone with a woman and do absolutely nothing but stare at a growing and fading fire. He either slept with them, made them get drunk until they'd given themselves to him, play childish pranks on them or even ditch them. But, as much as he felt secretly attracted to the blonde maiden sitting wordlessly beside him, he just couldn't dare do any of those things he usually does with other wenches. Especially knowing that she wasn't just any girl, she was the girl lost in love with his new chief. He could tell by the look on her spellbound eyes staring at the fire, that every single detail occupying her mind at the moment, was her man. A man she barely even talked to.

"Hey, Astrid?" Eret softly called, lowering a bit his head to get a better look of her eyes. Or at least try to "Do you even remember anything you said last night?"

"Yes." Was her only answer.

Then, he didn't know what else to ask, or tell her. He truly thought she had forgotten everything she had said while drinking down her sorrows before him. No, best said, he had hoped she had forgotten everything. How she spoke on how much she hated the feeling of being with someone and then not actually be at all with that person. How in the end it all felt as if they had never shared a life together.

Suddenly, he heard a sigh from her, "I just realized, I don't fit in his world, at allâ€¦" Her voice was absent, fading away, as if she was showing off her weakest point. The one point she only showed around Hiccup, and Hiccup only.

Then, Eret knew all too well where this conversation led to, "What makes you so sure of that?"

"He made it clear, last night."

"But, you were asleep."

Astrid smiled, faintly, but she did at the memory of having Hiccup assist her into getting comfortable in bed. "He stayed a little up there, and I heard him in." Shrugs, "I just acted like I was deeply asleep."

She wasn't lying though, she had heard his voice babbling on how he wouldn't like to see other men glance at her braid-less hair. How he would want to be the only one to enjoy that side of me. How funny and tender did he sound, reminding me how much he loved to be the one who knew all of my deepest secrets. I wouldn't spill that to others, especially not to Eret. What lies within the walls of our intimacy, was always justâ€¦ours. \_

"Oh. But I still don't get what you said about not being part of his plans anymore."

Astrid chuckled, "Long ago, it all seemed like he did his very best to impress others, to impress me. But now, he's allowed all this pressure take over him and slowly, he seems to remember everyone

around him, except one particular personâ€¦"

"Youâ€¦" Eret finished for her.

Astrid just nodded in agreement. Soon, she started to spill things she normally would hold back and keep to herself, "When Stoick died, I couldn't believe my eyes to see him laid down, lifeless under Hiccup's arms. I wanted to just take a strong hold of Hiccup and lock him in a tight embrace, make him forget everything he was witnessing, while having him in my arms. But, I couldn't. His mother was holding him and all I could do was rub on his back and arm. When he finally leaned to me, I hid my face against his head and slowly pulled him closer. A second later, he was crying against my neck. I wanted to do something. Find a way to comfort him the best I could, to ease his pain and drink it all in if I had to. But nothing happened. I couldn't do anything. And that, angered me the most. Days passed, and I could still catch him stare at the gigantic statue we built in Stoick's honor at Mead Hall, but as I walked toward him, wanting to take him home, wrapped in my arms and just stay with him all night, Valka reached to him, and took him home, with her.. I know, I shouldn't feel jealous of his own mother. I understand perfectly the fact that he needs to spend some more time to bond with her. I just get a littleâ€¦"

"Selfish." Eret finished for herâ€¦again.

Astrid glanced up at him, "Yeah." She gifted him a weak smile before staring back at the fire, "Well, turns out I haven't had the chance to stay at least a few feet close to him, without having some work to get over with or seeing him spending his time with other people. Andâ€¦ whenever we have the chance to finally have a few minutes to ourselves, he always finds a way to slip away."

Eret just stared at her. Waiting patiently for her to finish. "It just makes me wonder at times, where exactly I fit in this new life now. In his new lifeâ€¦"

"I hardly know my new chief, Astrid. But I certainly doubt he is doing all this with conscience. He might not even notice how much it has affected you. I believe you are giving it too much thought."

"Perhaps."

Eret was about to say something, when Skullcrusher suddenly growled, disrupting their conversation, warning the Vikings that it was far too late. And he wasn't far from the truth, though. Eret had glanced at the skies and spotted the moon somewhere past her highest peak. "Must be past midnight. We should head back."

"Right," Astrid agreed, starting to get herself up, and finding her boots by the fire, sliding them on. "There are wolves in these grounds."

"Huh!?" Eret startled himself, "Why didn't you say that earlier!?" Sooner than ever before, Eret had hopped over Skullcrusher and took a strong grasp of him.

Astrid couldn't help but to laugh, "Well, look at you! You should use that kind of speed more often at class." She teased while

hopping on Stormfly.

"You women are crazy!" Eret exclaimed as he gestured Skullcrusher to start taking off as soon as possible.

"Oh, come on, few seconds earlier you wouldn't be acting all chickenish."

"Few seconds later and we would be part of a massive wolf banquet!"

"Nah, I am too sour to enjoy." Astrid said.

"Tell me about itâ€|" Eret muttered.

"What was that?"

"Uh, nothing!" He quickly answered, "Let's just go home, please?"

"Babyâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p>An hour later, Astrid landed by the Mead Hall, just to see if everything was in order. She wasn't sleepy at all. She had rested with Stormfly during the day so the least she needed was to lay on a bed and do nothing. So after she sent the crybaby to his new house, she searched for some work to do before everyone woke up at sunrise. That way, she would take a nice head start on duties to fulfil.<p>

After seeing Stormfly walk off to their house and leave Astrid by herself in front of Meade Hall, Astrid took in a deep breath as if something was keeping her from entering for once and all. Yet, she shook it off right away and opened the door, slid in, and then closed it behind her.

There was not even a soul in there. Just a few weak lightings and a huge mess.

\_Did they have a feast? \_

"So, you \_finally\_ decided to show up." A worked up, tired voice called out from the end of the building as when Astrid glanced over her shoulder, she caught a glimpse of Hiccup sitting on the chief's chair at the end of the hall, rolling his charcoal pencil over the closed book of dragons, letting the small candlelit be the one illuminating his presence.

"What are you doing here so late?" Astrid asked while walking toward him.

Hiccup drew in a deep breath, his chest rising, "Well," exhales loudly "I organized a nice feast for everyone to relax and when people were finally kicked off to sleep, I just decided to get my hands in some studying for a while."

His voice sounded rather sarcastic, which made Astrid raise an eyebrow in wonder whether he was actually telling the truth or just

daring to mock her.

"Oh, and also, I wasn't feeling like sleeping." He added and then stood up from his chair, resting a hand over the table and staring at her with slightly annoyed eyes, "where in Thor's trail have you been?"

Astrid just shrugged, "Went for a ride. Stayed away for a while, then came back."

"Alone?"

"Mm, no. Eret found me hours later." Funniest of all, Astrid was being carelessly honest. Which somehow irritated him a little considering the truth wasn't always so pleasant.

"And you spent all evening with him?"

"Pretty much." She leaned her buttocks against the table and crossed her arms over her chest, not really looking at Hiccup, "Time flies when you get distracted, you know."

"Define, distracted, Astrid."

By that point, Hiccup was already standing right by her side. His hand slowly reaching out to her. She just shrugged a shoulder at that, "Distracted. We just talked and lost track of time. That's it."

"Astrid," Hiccup took a gentle hold on her arm, searching desperately for her eyes. When he finally found those two intense sapphire jewels of hers, he whispered for only her ears to hear "I don't like it when you're all alone with that guy."

"I thought you said you trusted him."

"I do, but not when it comes to being near you."

She chuckled, "What are you talking about, Hiccup?"

"I'm saying, that even though Eret seems like a good man and all that, he is still a man, Astrid. A man that buff usually has a higher level of uncontrolled hormones whenever close to a beautiful lady like you."

Astrid couldn't help but to burst out laughing.

Hiccup frowned at her, "I'm being serious, Astrid."

Astrid didn't answer, she just laughed and kept on laughing until he took a strong grasp on both of her elbows and gave them a quick shake, making her slightly flinch under his touch. He had never grabbed her this hard, and even though she barely felt it, it surprised her more the fact that it was him who had gripped on her like that. The one man who usually touches her with the finest care.

"Haâ€|haâ€|are youâ€|saying that you think I might soon allow a slip off with Eret?"

Hiccup gagged, "Um, no! Not exactly butâ€¦ he might take advantage of you if you're not being careful."

Astrid frowned and pulled herself away from him, "You should be careful! I-I-I am doing nothing but swallow down all the distance between us and Eret just always happens to be around when you're not. And yet, you think I might be getting a slip off with him?" She glared at him, although her eyes didn't seem angry at all. They seemed more like hurt.

Her heart clenching every second was making her feel irritated, filthy and simply annoyed by how strong it banged against her chest and stung within her at the thought of Hiccup possibly doubting her.

"No, Astrid, no. You're getting it all wrong."

"What I am getting, is that you don't trust me, Hiccup. Do you seriously think I would be stupid enough to betray our relationship?"

Hiccup waved his arms in the air out of despair, "Argh! Alright, if that's what you want to believe, then fine. Believe that. I'm way too tired to start an argument with you, Astrid. Next time you find yourself alone with him, try to make it as private as possible so rumors won't spread straight to my ears saying that the woman who is supposed to be my future wife, had been flying off to the horizons with the new dragon trainer who is actually being constantly spied by Ruffnut."

As he talked, he kneeled before the table and pulled out an axe and placed it over the table, right by her hand. "Oh, and I almost forgot, next time you plan on ditching dinner like this, please have at least the decency of notifying it. That way I wouldn't waste so much time working myself up just for you."

When Astrid took a good look at the axe, she noticed that it was her missing axe.

Had Hiccup had it all along?

The axe seemed to have new improvements. The metal was finer and lighter, but as sharp as when she brushed an absent finger over it, she could feel her skin battling against the possibilities of getting cut sooner or later. The handle was covered in light blue leather and on the edges of it, was scripted down her name with a Tiny Deadly Nadder over it. When she took a hold of it, it felt really light, but it was good enough for her to move as much as she would want to and still work perfectly on it.

Had he been working on my axe?

"Youâ€¦" She started, but footsteps that started to sound lower and lower made her raise her head and watch him walk toward the exit.

"Happy birthday, Astrid. Nightâ€¦" soon after, the large door closed behind him, and there was just her in such a big place.

#### 4. Misunderstood

How was I supposed to answer to \_that\_?

Hiccup had already left Meade Hall, assuring me he wasn't at all focusing on his ordinary chief duties all day. He had probably been planning a feast in my honor, waiting for the right moment to spend a while just relaxing and having fun, and where was \_I\_?

Next thing I knew, he was mad at me for spending a lot of time with Eret, son of whoever. As if it wasn't \_his\_ idea I'd give Eret private lessons to strengthen his rider skills so he could be much more useful around the village.

But it \_was\_ \_his\_ idea! Then why would he blame \_me\_ for doing something that comes along with what he asked me to?

I was confused, and suddenly feeling a mixture of annoying emotions that wouldn't let me think straight. I was angry, annoyed, irritated, frustrated, sad, back-drawn and even started to feel a tad \_guilty\_ about all this. But why should I ever feel like this, anyway?! \_He\_ was the one who rejected \_me\_ the other night, \_he\_ was the one who didn't allow ourselves be together for a few seconds longer, \_he\_ was the one who didn't even look at me after flashing out of my bed and leave me hanging, having me throwing down the drain all those nice little feelings that were starting to evolve and that hadn't awakened in a long time. He was the one drowning into a depth of sorrows all by himself. It was him who wanted no help nor comfort at all...

So, why should \_I\_ feel like this, and not \_him\_?

Am I so selfish I can't even see it?

By the time I ran out from the Meade Hall, chasing after Hiccup, he was already gone unseen. I tried and tried to look through the darkness, hoping to get a small glimpse of him at least from afar so I could know where to lead myself to. But I got nothing. Yet, there were \_four\_ places I would search for him before calling it a night and just let him be.

First, the \_forge\_. Hiccup spent most of his time in the forge working on saddles. If he wasn't working on constructions or flying with Toothless, he would probably be assisting Gobber at the forge, where he outgrew all of his blacksmith knowledgeâ€|and beyond.

The forge was dark, no sign of a single soul around. I still silently entered and allowed silence to take over so my ears would listen if there was any particular sound I could differentiate and then guess it could be him. But nothing moved.

I sighed, then walked out of the forge, closing the door gently behind me. I thought of searching for him at his house, â€"the \_second\_ place he could possibly be in right nowâ€" but then I knew Valka might be already asleep and staring down at where I stood with Hiccup for the moment, it probably wasn't a good idea to \_intrude\_.

\_Haâ€|.intrude. \_Since \_when\_ do I feel like an intruder in Hiccup's life? Better saidâ€|on \_any\_ life.



So, I decided not to look for him at his house. But, what if he was at his house?

Gee, Astrid. So much for being emotional todayâ€|

Next place that came up to my head, was Toothless' cove. I knew how much Hiccup enjoyed getting away every once in a while and not just fly off without a predetermined destiny ahead of him. Sometimes, he also enjoyed staying in peaceful grounds, with either just Toothless, or bring myself with him as well. Just to talk about random, meaningless things and let time pause for a very, very long time.

Yet, Toothless' cove is too far from here, and I need Stormfly or else I would get there by morning on foot.

I sighed, once again. This time in exasperation as I walked helplessly on the stoned road. I had to find Hiccup, I wanted to find him. I wanted to apologize for giving him a hard time, to embrace him in my arms and tell him how much I appreciated that he remembered my birthday and how much I loved what he did to my axe.

Not just thatâ€|I wanted to kiss him. Get lost in his lips and allow my body to give in to his hands as they adventured my skin, as if he knew exactly where to hold me in order to make me melt in his arms and lips, for good.

To be honest, it was a good thing he got a little taller than me. That way now he would hold me much tighter. Even if I get bruises.

Noâ€| I would never get bruises from him. Simply, because all of his touches are gentle, tender and delicate. As if his fingers wandered over my skin trying to prevent breaking it apart.

I had to find him.

I wasn't really used to apologizing, but my heart was driving me nuts already! Pounding in my chest as if it had nothing better to do in there. It was annoying.

My last hope in finding Hiccup, was the Dragon Academy. Yet, it wasn't a favorable option since it's been a while since I last saw him in the arena. Those became my grounds after Stoick parted to Valhalla and honestly, it didn't feel at all pleasant without Hiccup trying to be competitive and hopelessly intend to win over me.

I kind of miss our competitive times...now that I think of it-

As I climbed down to the arena, I saw one of the doors of the cage we used to lock the Hideous Zippleback in, slightly open.â€"now we use those for storage, though.

I'm sure I locked everything before I left. So I rose an eyebrow, confused, and then started walking toward it. My right hand cautiously slipped into my left shoulder pad and pulled out a newly polished dagger. As I entered the cage, I noticed a shadow sitting on the big table on the center of the cave. Getting closer, and closer, I rose my arm, preparing to attack when the shadow began to take form

as I got closer.

Auburn hair, a black leather-covered back facing me, a shining reflection from a prosthetic leg against the stoned wall; it all seemed far too \_familiar\_.

My arm slowly dropped and soon, I took in a silent deep breath, "Thought I'd find you here."

Hiccup didn't flinch. He didn't even turn to look at me. He just stayed there, sitting on the table, his legs crossed, what seemed to be like him playing with his own fingers. "\_Did\_ you?"

"Well, I \_hoped\_ I would." I corrected.

Chewing on my bottom lip, thinking on how to make this moment a little less awkward for both of us, I rolled my eyes and walked a little closer to him, "I like what you did to my axe. Thanks."

"Never mind." The sharpness in his voice only made the feeling of poisonous spikes going straight through my pericardium, increase. It wasn't the usual cold breeze that was making me shiver to my bones. It was his \_cold\_, distant voice.

\_So, what now, Astrid? Come up with something, girl. You can do itâ€|\_My thoughts wouldn't let me be for once. So I decided to please them by trying one more time. "Thank you for um, everything?"

"What?" This time, I could see him slightly glance over his shoulder at me. As if not believing the fact I was actually apologizing.

"And, I am sorry, for ditching dinner and completely ignoring it was my birthday." Yep. It was definitely hard for me to get an apology out of my throat. Apologies had a bitter taste.

"Not that I essentially\_ knew\_ you might have something planned." I quickly added on my own defense.

Still, not a word from him, I exhaled aloud through my nostrils and just allowed my impulses take over. So hesitantly, my left hand rose and reached out to his back, sliding up to his shoulder as the other hand placed the dagger on the table, a little further from him.

"Hiccup," whispering, I leaned forward and while supporting both of my hands on his arms, my lips gently brushed against the skin of his neck, up to his jawline and stopped right over his earlobe, "Please, tell me \_something\_."

This silence was killing me slowly. His silence, felt like the sharpest knives in all the land piercing through my lungs and slicing them in half. It stung, it angered me, and it \_weakened\_ me.

Unbelievable how being with this boy since kids has made me grow a weaker woman to his touch, to his treats, to his love. But what \_was\_ I feeling \_right\_ \_now\_ from him? It certainly wasn't love, or any kind of affection. Justâ€|\_silence\_.

"Hiccupâ€|" I called again, this time, my voice beginning to crack

and fade out. I was beginning to think he wouldn't respond, at all. That this was just a silent way to ask me to just \_stop\_ stalking him for the night and go home. I couldn't \_accept\_ it. But after more seconds of motionless reactions, my lips fell from his ear, and fierce teeth tortured my lips. Then, I began to slowly pull away. Regretting every second of useless intents to get his attention.

"Umâ€¦ uhâ€¦"

\_Awkward\_. That's how I was feeling at the moment. Suddenly \_stupid\_ and \_clumsy\_ as I backed off, my eyes drifting, trying to find some light that would guide their ways out of this terrible feeling caving within me. "Iâ€¦noâ€¦uhâ€¦I betterâ€¦" as if I were talking to a ghost, my back and bottom bumped against a barrel of weapons having them fall to the ground, making an awfully loud noise.

My eyes shut tight and for a moment I had expected to see myself on the ground joining the mess when a tight grip on my arm held me still and then yanked me back up on my feet. My back was now facing the exit. Not even bothering to look at him, I wiggled my arm from his hold and glanced back down at the exit. Making sure there were no more obstacles disrupting my desires to just run off.

"Whereâ€¦uhâ€¦hereâ€¦Iâ€¦" I kept muttering nonsense as I drew in a breaking deep breath. My insides were burning, I \_knew\_ this behavior of his meant he wouldn't let me off the hook so easily, so I thought it'd be best if I just left things as they were and give him what he lately seems to love so muchâ€¦\_space\_.

Then, I felt my arm being tightly gripped on, once again. Glancing over to find him wrap his other arm around my waist, and then possessively pulling me closer. He stared deeply into my eyes and pulled me close enough to have our breaths collide and send shivers all throughout my body.

"Are you \_hurt\_?" He asked.

"Huh?"

Hiccup's eyes searched me high and low. He loosened his grip on my elbow and used that same hand to absently search on my shoulders, neck, sides, hips, and then rested on my lower back. "You're not hurt." He whispered.

Did he even \_care\_ if I was? Wasn't that the exact opposite of what his \_previous\_ behavior was saying?

Oh well, it wasn't like I was acting as if \_I\_ also cared.

This time, \_I\_ was the one not saying a word. But it wasn't because I didn't want to. It was simply because I \_couldn't\_ find words for him right now.

Hiccup seemed to have noticed my sudden hesitation and licked on his lips before raising a hand up to my cheeks, then lowered it to my neck. His fingers were cold... \_Freezing\_. Made me shiver under his touch. Soon after, his lips gently pushed against mine.

They were also cold as ice... Hel, his lips were literally shivering against my own. Trying to keep a decent movement, but obviously unable to do so.

My lips connected with his and allowed him to take over once again, locking my lower lip in them, then kissing both and then locking on my upper lip. I barely even moved my lips. Fearing of doing anything that might make him pull away again, like last time. So I just stayed there like a complete idiot, holding onto him, resting a hand on his chest and the other holding his forearm.

Soon, all the cold I was feeling through my entire body, faded away. Now, my blood was boiling as if being set in thermal waters. But then, it all cooled off when his lips parted from mine. His dashing, deep green eyes glowed with the moonlight as he stared down at my own. His thumb absently caressing on my chin, then rubbing on my lips, as if mentally taking note of their detail, to someday sketch them down on his geeky sketchbook.

My lips then pushed against the charcoal-stained skin of his mistreated fingertip. Unwillingly, of course. I never authorized them to gently kiss on his thumb. Which made shivers crawl again down my spine.

Thinking he might pull away, to my surprise, he smiled in return. Oh, that beautiful smile! There it finally was!

His thumb moved from my lips and was now replaced by his own, once again, before he would pull back again and stare down at me again.

Ugh, seriously, Hiccup!? I thought.

"You're cold." He whispered, nearly brushing his lips against mine before taking small steps back into the cave, dragging me with him, not letting go from my waist.

"I'm fine." I whispered back, against his lips. Was I really as cold as he said I was? All the while I thought he was the one cold...not me.

"Don't lie to me." His asking sounded more like a final command. Yet, it didn't surprise me at all since he knew very well when I lied to him and when I didn't. His ways of making it clear for me not to dare take him as a fool, were as harsh and as clear as my ways to make him understand that no one ever lies to Astrid Hofferson, ever.

So I smiled, not really helping it, since the tone he chose this time to spread those last few words was deep and slightly interrupted by another kiss.

"Never." I assured against his lips and slowly rose a hand all the way from his mid-back to the back of his neck, slightly playing with the strands of hair there. He smiled at the feeling of it. I did too. I knew how much he enjoyed the tickles my fingers caused on that particular spot. So I kept the game for a few more seconds and then sunk my fingers in his massive, soft hair and stroked it gently.

"I'll get you for ditching me like that." He warned before trailing off my lips and kissing on my cheek.

"Fair enough." Closing my eyes, I just allowed myself to get lost in his touch as we finally ended up with my back against the wall and nothing but Hiccup blocking my every way out.

His lips left graceful kissing marks all over my neck. Whispering silent oaths, "I - missed \_this...us."\_

"So did I..." I breathed out.

Filling up his lungs with my scent, having his body pressed tightly against my own, forcing me to let out a helpless, \_pleasant\_ sigh.

Does this mean I've been forgiven?!

I could \_feel\_ his heart thumping loudly and harder against his chest, as if it was pleading for a quick release so it would join my heart in my chest. But in all honesty, my heart seemed to want the same. So, who could possibly be heartless when considering this an even possibility?

When Hiccup's head came back up to meet mine, his eyes were dark with lust, but shinning with care at the very same time. My lips formed a small smile for him and he gifted me one back before locking our lips together. Then, I felt \_it\_.

His tongue finally parting my lips, asking permission to enter and claim my mouth as his own. To take over us both.

I was so driven by him that I barely even had the strengths to tease him as I usually do. This time was different. This time, \_he\_ was the one who wanted to be in charge, to claim everything and not leave a single jewel forgotten from this treasure that had \_always\_ been \_reserved\_ for \_him\_, and always \_will\_ \_be\_. I \_wanted\_ him to take over me tonight. After all, it was \_my\_ birthday. Even if it was a day delayedâ€|

Melting in his arms as his tongue twirled around my own, slowly savoring her, making dear love to it, feeling his urges against her, calling for her to assist as well. And she \_did\_. My tongue obeyed his, just like a good lover, just like a good \_future wife\_.

Soon, his hand lowered to my lower back once again and pulled me a little tighter against him. This time, \_he\_ was the one who released a small sigh between kisses as he felt how his trousers became tighter by the second. I was far \_used\_ to the feeling, but never used \_enough\_. After all, we have \_never\_ gone any further than intensive kisses and bodies against each other. But that was itâ€|\_for now\_.

We both knew our bodies ached for one another. But we always tried our best to keep it fair with our reputations, especially now that he's become chief. We wouldn't want to ruin a \_special\_ moment, even if the urges exploded within us, with a massive load of desire. Which I cannot deny, I \_wanted\_ him. I dreamt of the day when he and I would become \_one\_, finally. But, conscience is \_always\_ present whenever I need to be reminded that I would love to enjoy my moments

with Hiccup, \_without\_ feeling guilty in the end or as if someone might find out or something like that. It would not only be embarrassing, but alsoâ€¦\_justâ€¦\_wrong\_. Unlike other people I know of, I \_do\_ happen to have \_some\_ respect over my family and my own.

But stillâ€¦ this contain-yourself-kind-of-mission was a heck of a \_hard\_ \_thing\_ \_to\_ \_do\_.

His bulge had now slipped underneath my skirt when Hiccup moved his hips upwards, and brought my skirt up. The rubs against me became more evident as his sighs deepened within my mouth and his arms tightened around me. My legs shivered, wondering \_how\_ exactly I have stayed straight up this long andâ€¦"

"I'm telling you, I heard a loud noise and thought Astrid might be here already."

The sound of Fishlegs' voice approaching the arena startled us both. Hiccup pulled from the kiss but kept me tightly in his embrace as he glanced back, over his shoulder to get a glimpse of the nearly opened door of our currently little love cave.

Thin sunlight rays threatened to get in.

"Morningâ€¦" I whispered making him glance back at me. Instead of being furious or feeling rather alarmed by the fact that Fishlegs and the others could find us at \_any\_ minute, I was more likeâ€¦\_bummed\_.

He might have read my expression and his lips formed a warm smile before kissing tenderly on my lips and then slowly pulling away, having his fingers trail down my arms, forearms and let my fingers be the very last ones touching him. He surely didn't want to let go. And that made me \_smile\_ back at him.

He hadn't needed to tell me what he was thinking of, his eyes said it \_all\_. The warmth sparkle in them made my stomach feel all fuzzy and my heart pleasantly clench. He didn't have to spill out his feelings for me, I knew them perfectly after seeing how he looked at me through the sunlight. So confident, so loving and soâ€¦\_Hiccup\_.

Yep. I was \_definitely\_ forgiven now.

"We'd better get out before they get in." I said.

He nodded and walked toward the mess I made with the barrel of weapons, "Yeah, help me with this, would you? \_Miss-I-just-had-to-mess-it-all\_!" He teased.

I rolled my eyes and walked up to him, kneeled on his opposite side and began picking up the axes and hammers, dropping them back into the barrel.

"Gags! Did you hear that, girl?!" Fishlegs exclaimed from the outsides of the cave as I opened the door completely and let Hiccup come out carrying the barrel of weapons and placing it on a safer spot near the wall, just a few feet away from me.

"Flattering of you, really." I sarcastically said while pouting at him.

He just laughed, "Well, I have to make sure you don't just fall off again and make a mess out of yourself."

"First off, I did not fall. I just bumped into it. There is a tight difference between those two."

"There is also a tight possibility that you might take advantage of these weapons near your reach and slay someone's head off." Hiccup responded.

"Probably."

"Uh, guys?" Fishlegs said, "You two here?"

Oh brother!

## 5. Our First Flight

"Uh, am I missing something here?" Tuffnut asked while staring at Hiccup, who was now dusting his hands before straightening his back.

"Yeah, since when does Hiccup pays the arena a visit?" Ruffnut continued on her twin's quest.

"Well, since Astrid nearly destroys the new saddles with a barrel full of weapons and since I happen to also live in this island and have all the rights to come here." Hiccup answered, smirking at them all.

Astrid just snarled. "The barrel wasn't that close to the saddles, Hiccup. You're exaggerating things." She crossed her arms over her chest.

"I don't think that's what the twins meant. What they mean is, since when do we see you two together in the arena?" Fishlegs pointed out.

"Would you quit with the asking? I'm always up early and Hiccup just happened to pay us a visit before dawn. I accidentally bumped against the barrel of weapons, it fell, and now we fixed it!" She bit her lip in vexation. Clearly feeling uncomfortable by all the unnecessary questions.

"Hm! I wonder what exactly made you bump against the barrel of weapons!" Snotlout mumbled to himself but unfortunate for him, there was just enough silence around them that morning to make the most minimum sound be easily heard. So in less than a second, Astrid was already crouching, grabbed a rock from the ground, aimed and threw it with massive force through the Twin's thin line of space between each other and strike right on Snotlout's helmet. Causing the boy to flinch, sway dizzily side to side and fall to the ground.

"Niiice!" The twins sang together as they watched an almost unconscious Snotlout laid on the ground.

"Anyone else?" Astrid asked while preparing another rock in her hand and glaring at the other three.

Fishlegs quickly shook on his head and the twins looked at themselves before looking back at Astrid with thrilled expressions and together, again, they both said, "Do it again!"

Astrid just rolled her eyes at them and let go of the rock as she felt Hiccup's hand gently resting on the low of her back, getting her complete attention. "I have to go now. I'll be at the blacksmith shop if you need me."

Astrid's eyes glistened at him, her lips forming a small, tender smile as she nodded once, in silence agreement.

Hiccup smiled back, though he broke it off soon to say, "We still need to talk. Would you come by for dinner at Great Hall?"

"Most likely." She answered.

"Ugh, you better! We worked our butts off all day with a naggy chief and all for you to not show up." Tuffnut barked.

"Yeah, sorry for that guysâ€¦" She guiltily sank her head and gave them all a sheepish smile.

"What are you babbling so much about? You ate all the salmon and then stripped on one of the tables." Ruffnut pointed out.

"Tell me about it. Of all of us, you were the one who had the most fun." Snotlout said while standing back up and rubbing on his head before putting his helmet back on and shaking off the dizziness.

"Yeah but I still remember nothing of it. So we have to do it again!" Tuffnut signaled to the skies.

Hiccup sighed, at the look on Astrid's face when she looked at him all confused, "Long storyâ€¦ I'll tell you tonight if we have a chance."

"Deal."

Hiccup rose his free hand up to her cheek and gently rubbed it with his thumb, "So, I'll see you then." He leaned to gently kiss her cheek. Enjoying the feeling of his lips contacting her pale skin once again. When they parted, he warmly smiled, let go of her and started walking out of the arena, nodding once at Fishlegs as a sign of farewell.

Yet, they all later noticed that as Hiccup walked his way to the exit, Eret was standing at the entrance, apparently witnessing everything. Hiccup stopped his steps just a few feet from him and nodded once in greetings. Eret did the same, but his mouth was slightly loosened as he tried to hide the shock of what his eyes had seen.

Soon after, Hiccup was already gone and Eret came in closer to the rest.



"Ah, there is my handsome bun!" A light strain of salivary fluids rolled down the left corner of Ruffnut's lips as she swayed back and forth, daydreaming with both of her hands laced together under her chin. Eyes sparkling. "Good morning baby. Slept well? Missed me in bed?"

"Aah, are you kidding me?" Snotlout began, "Babe, you know I am way stronger than him."

"And I buffer!" Fishlegs timidly said.

"Ugh," Tuffnut shook himself in revolt "Disgusting!"

"I thought you'd oversleep today." Astrid told Eret.

"Nah, I took a quick nap and then came in. I wouldn't want to mess up Skullcrusher's willing mood today." Eret responded scratching on the back of his head before looking back at her, "Um, Astrid?"

Astrid was already giving her back to everyone as she walked to the entrance, receiving Stormfly who was joyfully walking in. "Yeah?" She patted on the dragon's head and scratched on her jawline.

"Was Hiccup truly here or was this just product of my disturbing imagination?" Eret asked.

Astrid slightly laughed, "He was here."

"Yeah, and we still don't get why." Fishlegs added.

Astrid chuckled, "Guys, come on! Is it that bad that he visited the arena for once in so long?"

"It's not that is a bad thing. It's more like a strange thing since he barely has time for the arena and especially knowing things between you two haven't exactly been right for a while." Fishlegs responded.

"How things are between us, is our business. The fact he put aside a few minutes to come by makes me happy enough, so stop asking so much!" Astrid hissed, shrugged and then kissed on Stormfly's jawline before walking toward Snoutlout, who was disturbingly driving Ruffnut to a small corner, near the shields.

"Today," she grabbed a hold on Snotlout's horn before he would lean any closer to Ruffnut and dragged him away from her as she continued talking "We will try something different. We will train out in the wilderness. I want the apprentices to learn the basics of surviving if lost with their dragons."

"Ou..ou!" Astrid!" Snotlout cried as he was dragged by the Viking girl, "I was just giving my peekey-poo a warming good morning!"

"No disturbing relationship behaviors allowed, Snotlout, and you know it." Astrid hissed.

"Oh yeah?! And what about all the kissey times you and Hiccup have had while training!?" He complained.

"That was long before it massively seemed to affect on your head and it were just quick pecks so \_that's\_ allowed."

"Still." Snotlout grumbled as she finally let go of his helmet and walked over to the supply storage.

"Gather your dragons, we will take off in twenty minutes." Astrid informed and when she turned to glance at everyone else, she saw Tuffnut sitting on one of the carts, picking intensely on his nose and kicking on his legs. Fishlegs was trying to get Ruffnut accept a small and sad purple flower and Snotlout was holding a chair up, sneaking up behind Fishlegs.

Astrid just rolled on her eyes before glancing back at Eret who was just silently fixing on his saddle. When he looked at her, he opened his mouth to say something, but then Astrid just cut him off, "Don't ask me \_anything\_."

Eret seemed surprised at her command. Had she known how to read his mind? How did she know he was going to ask her aboutâ€|well \_you\_ \_know\_.

But Astrid was determined on the things she wanted to say and those she'd want to keep to herself. As she said earlier, matters between her and Hiccup had always been \_their\_ \_business\_ and it will always be \_just\_ \_theirs\_. Even when they started dating, they always intended to keep their relationship matters as a low profile before others just to keep it professional and \_private\_. Now more than ever, they might share some kisses here and there in front of other Vikings, but that was it.

Besides, who actually ever liked having others bust their noses into private grounds?

\* \* \*

><p>"Stormfly, guard." Astrid whispered while rubbing on her dragon's chin as she began stripping off her clothes and laying them flat on the nearest boulders.<p>

Everyone had parted ways in the wilderness. Each had chosen a spot to practice their survival skills individually. Luckily, Astrid had found a spot near a river, where she could enjoy a nice bath under the small cascade. She had already built a fire and fished with Stormfly. Unfortunately, they didn't get much salmon on her side of the wilderness. All they mostly got were perch and brown trout. Awful, but it was \_something\_.

Stormfly was unsatisfied with the food. Since it was a low amount for such a big reptile. But Astrid had promised her that as soon as they got back home, she would get all the chicken she deserved for being such a good girl. That \_seemed\_ to have eased her for a while, though.

"Stormfly," Astrid called while undoing her braid. The dragon rose its head immediately in signs of utter attention, "Don't let \_anyone\_ near our spot."

Stormfly nodded twice and skipped away and through the bushes.

Letting the Viking girl all by herself as she made her way into the water, letting the cold drape all over her waist, rise as she walked further to her bare breasts and finally halt its levels by her neck.

Enjoying the uneven cold and warm feeling of it draping her skin, caressing her softness and covering each and every scar her slim body had.

If only, this refreshing moment would last much longer than it had toâ€|

\* \* \*

><p>Whistling a low tuned, adventurous melody while walking through the unstable grounds, holding a large pile of wood in his robust, large arms, Eret found himself unable to remember where exactly was the way back to his region where he had left Skullcrusher, guarding their fish. So he just carelessly wandered around until he could find a familiar spot.<p>

When his steps suddenly seemed to have \_echoed\_, Eret halted his movements and brought himself into a deep silence as he glanced around, slightly startled.

At the sight of nothing at all, he continued walking forward in utter silence until he heard the sound of water falling and harshly splashing on a calmer current. "Finallyâ€|" he whispered to himself as the sound became even louder and louder the closer he got.

"Wait a minute," Eret said to himself as he noticed that there was \_something\_ a tad \_different\_ than what he had remembered his old spot a few hours ago. Skullcrusher \_wasn't\_ there. Then, he saw \_clothes\_ neatly placed on the boulders nearby and as his eyes wandered crazily around the whole place, he caught a small, yet perfect glimpse of a young lady enjoying herself under the water falls.

His impulses made him hurry into the nearest bush and hid there. Praying to the gods he hadn't been seen. Luckily for him, he wasn't easily spotted. He let go of the pile of wood and peaked through the leaves and branches to take a longer look at the figure.

\_Who\_ was this young maiden?

Her pale skin glowed with how the waters caressed her entire body, her head sunk under the falls, letting its magic work on her delicate hair and facial features. Both hands running through a long, curvy golden hair that reached her mid-back. The way her back arched to get more from the waters made two perfectly rounded and small breasts peak out from nowhere.

Surely, she looked small of \_everything\_, \_but\_ still oh-so-beautiful to him. \_Who\_ was this lady?

No, this wasn't a lady, nor just a simple maiden, this was a nymph. An angel who just decided to take on her break time to fly down to mortal grounds and enjoy the nature she protected along with the gods above. Yes, that was sheâ€|an angel. And he \_wanted\_ this angel. He wanted to touch that porcelain skin, enjoy every inch of her paleness

and even allow himself be embraced in her wings. He wanted to  
kiâ€

"You kow, \_my\_ hair is much longer than \_that\_." Eret flinched at the sound of Ruffnut's vague voice, who was suddenly laying on her stomach, right beside him. Her hands cupping under her chin, being supported by her elbows buried in the ground. Apparently also spying on \_the\_ \_angel\_.

"What, theâ€|" Eret finally snapped out of it, "Ruffnut. What are youâ€|\_how\_ \_long\_ have you been there?"

"Ever since you abandoned your spot to grab some wood, \_baby\_."

Eret rolled his eyes and before he would open his mouth once again to start complaining, Ruffnut kept on, "You know, you \_will\_ get in trouble if someone knows you've been spying on \_Astrid\_."

Eret's eyes widened. Was \_that\_ Astrid?!

"Wait, what? No, I'm not spying on the chief'sâ€"

"Ugh, save it pretty boy." Ruffnut interrupted, \_again\_. "I can keep a secret, but I also \_want\_ something in exchange of it."

Eret swallowed harshly, still looking at the crazy female twin, wondering what exactly she would want from him.

Her hand soon started to run its fingers over his nicely sweaty arm as she leaned closer to him, "Well, let me think about it first. \_Then\_ I'll tell you."

"Uh, no." He pulled his arm back, "Tell me \_now\_ so we can get over it."

"No, no, no handsome. \_I'll\_ put up with the rules this time. Or else I \_will\_ tell the others what I found out just nowâ€|not to mention, I'll tell \_Hiccup\_." With this, Ruffnut waggled on her eyebrows at him and kissed on her hand, not giving him a chance to use his good reflexes to avoid her when she had slapped his lips with it.

Eret wiped his lips cleanâ€"or at least tried toâ€"and watched as she made sexy facial expressions while crawling backwards like a cheetah getting ready for chasing after her pray or some so. He was disgusted, by the sight of it. As much as Eret would love a sensual and open wench, Ruffnut was \_way\_ \_far\_ from his type of perky wench.

But, so was \_Astrid\_. And yet, he was staring at her.

Eret just had to look away. After knowing who this lovely angel was, he just couldn't dare to look back at her, probably in a long while without feeling so ashamed with himself.

He should've grab his wood and head back to find Skullcrusher as soon as possible, forget everything he had seen and more importantly, act as if nothing ever happened. But he couldn't just find easy ways to leave, his impulses had dominated him at that moment. His head rose again and peaked through the branches to \_see\_ her swim back to the edge, joyfully walk to her clothes and let the wind dry her skin

while she sat on a warm boulder with a knee up to her chest and the other comfortably stretched down as she began to braid her golden hair.

He heard her hum a soft song, he couldn't get a glimpse of her frontal side, but he did get a spectacular view of her backside.

Water dripping from every inch of her, her eyes seemed to be closed whenever she would move her head to a side he could get a quick look of her aspect and simply take it all in.

I have never seen such beauty in just one womanâ€¦ He thought. His mouth dropping open as he saw how her legs absently moved to get comfortable but never switched positions.

I wonder, how many times has that fine figure been touched by the hands of my chief. I wonder, how many times eyes had been laid on such bare beauty. How many kisses have marked that forbidden temple. How-no... This angel, is indeed my chief's one. It is wrong and disrespectful of me to be looking at what only his eyes should be staring at. I must go, and before anyone else notices I was gone.

—

With that, Eret swallowed with a bit of difficulty and crawled backwards, as silently as he could before grabbing his wood and carefully getting as far as he could from those dangerous and deadly grounds.

Effectively, soon, a loud squawk alarmed him as he turned around to see Stormfly chasing after him. He loudly gasped and obeyed his natural instincts of running of like a crazy-scared bastard.

\* \* \*

><p>"See? I got here earlier than planned." Astrid proudly said while sitting right by the chief's seat at The Meade Hall, that night.<p>

Hiccup smiled at her, "Good." He teased and leaned a little closer to her while holding his mug on one hand, "That way we can have more time for us." He whispered, her blood suddenly began to boil.

"Ugh, would you two please get a room?" Tuffnut interrupted as he sat on his usual spot, placing his plate of roasted chicken on the table and taking in a large amount of ale from his mug.

Without even taking his eyes off of hers, "Nah, not yet." His hand gently resting on hers "Everything has to be finished before that happens."

"What are you talking about?" Astrid asked, slightly laughing, not really helping it since she started to consider his loving faces quite amusing.

"You'll find out soon enough." He assured and pecked on her cheek before pulling back again and facing the others, slightly nodding in greetings and soon began to eat off on his salmon.

Astrid was still kind of confused by all this. Yet she shook it off immediately and started enjoying the feast in her honorâ€¦\_second\_ \_one\_ in a row, though. She watched how Eret danced with two and three maidens at once around the place, how the dÃ©cor was lit with vivid colors and the music played happily through the night. The fish basin was full, as it were the roasted chicken on their separated platters for the Vikings to choose their own.

Valka was helping serving the food and keep order at that area while Gobber controlled the mead. Or best said, tried to keep \_himself\_ controlled.

Snotlout was ravaging on his stuffed chicken drumstick while Ruffnut stared undeniably lost at Eret.

"So, how was your day?" Hiccup asked once he swallowed on his food. Knowing that Astrid was the one who would \_actually\_ pay any attention to him.

She wasn't eating much though. She was mostly staring down at her mug as if she had been deeply lost in thought. "Well, something strange happened today while we were training at the wilderness."

Hiccup continued silently eating, though he was constantly shifting his eyes from her to the food and from the food back to her. \_Boy was he hungryâ€¦\_

"I sent us all to the wilderness to practice on our ways of survival if we ever slipped up. Each rider chose a different spot with their dragons according to what they thought it would be a nice place to do that kind of task. My spot was right by a river and I took advantage of the spare of time I had to take a bath. Suddenly I get this weird feeling that I'm being \_watched\_ on and when I start getting dressed, I hear Stormfly making alarming noises and I couldn't help but to think I \_was\_ right."

"You asked her to guard for you?" Hiccup asked, mouth half full but he covered it slightly with his forearm.

Astrid just nodded.

"That's weird. Are you sure you chose a spot where no one would be so close by?"

"Hiccup, I was the \_last\_ one to pick a spot. I saw \_everyone\_ descend to their picks."

"I may \_know\_ what could have been spying on you," Ruffnut suddenly added as both, Hiccup and Astrid shifted their glances at the female twin who was holding her mug on her left hand.

"You \_do\_?" Both of them asked at the same time.

Ruffnut just shrugged, "I \_don't\_ know, I'm just saying. I mean, it could be \_anything\_ or \_anyone\_ just passing by and mistakenly startled your dragon on its way. Has happened to me before."

Hiccup rose a brow. Astrid just growled in her insides. "Why do we even bother listening to their nonsense, again?" She muttered for just Hiccup to hear.

Hiccup chuckled and shook his head, "As much as I hate to admit it, she might be right, Astrid. It could be just any other animal startling Stormfly or one of the students passing by."

"Yeah, but the point is I happen not to like having company while bathing, thank you." She growled lowly again and glared back down at her mug.

Something just didn't feel right about all this to her. She wasn't buying the whole idea of it just being a simple animal startling Stormfly. If only dragons would talk Viking, she could possibly get an idea on what was making her feel so uncomfortable that evening.

"Anyway," Hiccup interrupted her chain of thought as she blinked back at him, giving him her uttermost attention once again, "I have something for you, milady."

Astrid smirked, then playfully pouted, "Hiccup, you already gave me back my axe." She reminded him.

He just shifted his shoulders as he usually does and slightly sunk his head while sheepishly smirking at her. "Well, yeah but the axe wasn't exactly the main present."

Astrid rose an eyebrow, suddenly confused. "Then what is it?"

Hiccup grinned, "First, go get my mom and Gobber while I gather everyone else."

"What? Hiccup, I don't think gathâ€œ"

"Come on, don't start to get difficult on me tonight." Hiccup interrupted her while standing up, holding both of her forearms and bringing her gently up with him before slightly pushing her at the direction to where his mom and Gobber were at the servings and barrels of mead. "Please."

Astrid didn't say another word. She just glanced over at him while dumbly walking toward Gobber and right after she could catch a confident smile from his lips, she turned her back to him and obediently did as she was told.

\* \* \*

><p>Getting Gobber to move wasn't that hard at all. Once she had told him that Hiccup needed him out front, he tried his best to get his bottom up from the floor and hurried himself to his young chief. Wellâ€œ|honestly? He actually <em>needed<em> some help to get up. Good thing Astrid was in perfect shape, though she did need a slight push on Gobber's back from Snotlout, who went along with their mentor to find their chief.

Next was Valka. She was laughing and apparently well distracted with another woman in the place. She was holding an almost empty platter of fish in both of her hands.

Their conversation was nearly interrupted when I got closer and her smile widened as she glanced over me. I honestly began to feel

slightly uncomfortable since she and I haven't had a nice conversation ever since she appeared from nowhere. I liked the woman. I surely did. She was adventurous, had this motherly warmth soaked all over her, cared for the dragons as much as Hiccup and I did, and mostly, she was as crazy behaved as Hiccup! \_

\_She was him, in a female versionâ€|better said. But still, she had been spending much more time with Hiccup than I have through these past few months and she's been equally busy trying to comfort him as how I wish to have. So having a few minutes to stay and have a nice talk, wasn't exactly an option for any of us for the moment. \_

"Oh, hello, Astrid." \_Valka said. \_

"Um, sorry to interrupt, but Hiccup asked me to come and find you for a moment." \_I was surprisingly nervous every time I had to share something with this woman. What annoyed me the most, was that I felt this way only when with her. Not even when Stoick was around had I ever felt so strange. Stoick and I had a rather much more flexible relationship. He treated me as if I was some kind of daughter to himâ€|A daughter who constantly physically mistreated his son.

\_

"Does he?" \_She asked, I just nodded. \_

"Well then, let's go on." \_Valka nodded in apologies to the hefty, black haired woman with a bun holding her hair tight still and glanced back at me. Surprising me when she rested her hand on the middle of my back and walked me with her, back to Hiccup. She was grinning all the while. \_

\_Did she know something about all this? Did she know what Hiccup was actually up to? \_

"So, Astrid," \_Valka said as we walked \_"I was wondering if I could come visit you at the arena while you're training the dragons. I'm curious to meet all the ones that have been training with you."

\_I couldn't really help but to smile at the sound of that. She had been busy taking care of the new dragons and helping Hiccup rebuilding their own home these past two months and she barely had a few hours left before sundown to ride on Cloudjumper. In fact, now that I think of itâ€|I think I have just seen Valka truly riding Cloudjumper three times. The other times I've seen her on her dragon, she's been using it as a way to speed up on the daily chores. Still, apparently, she also wanted to visit the arena. Does she enjoys being this busy?\_

"You may come as many times as you want, Valka. You are more than just welcomed at the Academy."

\_Her lips curled up, so motherly at me, that I almost felt as if I had my own mother right in front of me. Now thatâ€|truly felt good.

\_

"Excellent! I cannot wait to meet all those dragons."

"\_Meet\_? Not just that, Valka, we will \_train\_ them together." \_I winked at her. \_



\_The invite seemed to have pleased her since she nearly jumped of excitement. Yeahâ€|she truly was Hiccup's motherâ€| \_

"Really!? Oh, thank you Astrid!" Her shoulders the relaxed "You know, I think I will \_truly\_ enjoy having you as part of my family."

\_My blood suddenly rose to my cheeks once I heard that. I didn't even know what to do or say except nodding slightly in agreement, \_"And I think I will love having you near all the time, as well."

\* \* \*

><p>Hiccup's eyes glistened at the sight of Astrid and his mother come back to him and by the looks of it, they seemed to have been <em>bonding<em>.

That's what he wanted. Well, one of the \_many\_ things he wantedâ€|

He wanted to feel like Astrid and his mom were getting along just fine. It was important to him for their family to get along with each other. After all, it all suddenly felt as if it all had started to count from zero and onwards since they have just met Valka.

He knew it was different than when with his dad, who \_adored\_ Astrid as one of his own. It had shocked him when he first found out his son and Astrid actually \_understood\_ each other. He even planned on having her married to a hero from another island in order to keep a strong alliance with Berk. But after growing to know how strong his son's affections towards the girl got much more evident with time, he assured everyone who knew them that no alliance was to be made if it involved breaking apart his son's precious relationship with Astrid.

Which was one of the reasons why he was anxiously looking forward to have her as his \_very\_ \_own\_ daughter-in-law.

"I know," Hiccup began once he had everyone's attention "that this feast was meant to simply celebrate on Astrid's birthday. I declare myself \_guilty\_ for giving her my gift when the party was already over, \_last\_ \_night\_. But that was when the birthday girl decided to finally show up." At that, everyone laughed. Astrid just rolled her eyes, laughing as well though.

"But, I still have one more gift. And the reason why I didn't blow up the surprise along with giving her axe back, was because this particular detail, was suggested by \_my\_ \_dad\_."

Everyone grew silent. So much, it even sent shivers throughout his body.

Hiccup glanced at her and took a gentle hold on one of her hands in his own. "Almost a year ago, one morning, I was on my way to get some breakfast when my dad was surprisingly silent. He usually babbled at me on how irresponsible I was being for not attending the village and so on. But that morning, he didn't say a word. I was thinking about many things and when I finally felt the courage to spit it out, I \_did\_."

"I told him; \_dad, you know Astrid and I have been together for a

while now, right? \_He agreed with me, and even said that he was starting to grow impatient on how Astrid hadn't gotten me to set still in the village for longer hours. Soon I told him that probably \_I\_ was the one guilty for taking her away on Stormfly and Toothless for longer hours away from the village, exploring new lands."

Astrid couldn't really help the chuckle at the sound of that. It was \_true\_ thoughâ€|

"So, after a while, I said; \_but dad, I've been thinking through this for a while now and I think I've come up with a choice.\_ Then my dad said something like, \_Oh, are you finally going to help on the village, son? Great!\_" His voice went deep as he imitated Stoick's grumbling voice.

Everyone just laughed, \_including\_ Hiccup. "Anyway, I shook off his idea of helping responsibly around and skipped to the part I truly wanted to get through. I said, \_no, dad, this is something else. It's about Astrid and me,\_" For once, my dad thought I was gonna tell him that I was planning on ending my relationship with her. Which he completely started to jump into false conclusions and lecture me on how great of a Viking warrior she was and how he wouldn't allow another heir of lands to be with herâ€| as if I \_didn't\_ \_know\_ all that already." He helplessly muttered the last part.

"So I said," His eyes landed on her, now both of his hands holding hers, warming their skins together at their touch as his eyes slowly began getting lost in hers and his voice grew deeper, softer and much more loving. As if he was carrying all of his feelings for her in his voice as he continued speaking, "\_Dad, I just wanted to tell you, that I have been thinking about how much I love having her around, how much I yearn to see her every morning, and how it ached to say goodnight. I want all that to stop, to end for good. Because I want her eyes to be the very first ones I see every morning when I get up, and the very last when I go to sleep. Dad, I want to marry Astridâ€|I want to make her as happy as I can. Even if it were the last thing I did.\_"

Surely, Astrid didn't have the most \_minimum\_ idea this had actually happened. For her eyes were glowing, slowly filling at the image of his story taking place in her head. She imagined every word, every gesture from Hiccup and Stoick as she listened to the confession, and it had truly twisted her heart as strong as it could have ever.

She didn't know Hiccup thought \_like\_ \_that\_ about her. She might have an idea, but he had never been this open about his feelings with \_anyone\_. And now, he was doing so, revealing a long sealed secret between him and his dad, and not just to her, but to nearly \_the\_ \_whole\_ \_island\_.

Hiccup took in a deep breath, "Yeah, we fight, we have our disagreements and all that. But what I mostly love about us, is that no matter what, we \_always\_ seem to find a way to grow back together. And up till now, even as chief and with tons of things decreasing my time with \_you\_ going on, I still \_haven't\_ changed my mind. That morning, my dad and I discussed ways to surprise you with a nice detail. To make our relationship a huge motive to celebrate after the big announcement. Until we came up with somethingâ€|." With this, Hiccup let go of one of her hands to search within his tunic pockets and pulled out a rounded, shiny, and golden jewel. "Our plans were to

make the announcement on this birthday of yours, and marking time from this day onwards, three more months till that special day, when we finally become \_one\_ \_soul\_."

Her eyes fell to what he was holding onto. She took a hesitant hold of it. It was a golden \_ring\_. It shined with the lights above them and instead of having words scripted in it, it had what it seemed like the drawing of a Night Fury, with a boy and a girl who looked just like their younger selves, riding the dragon.

She couldn't stop her cheeks from starting to hurt with how much she was smiling. Her eyes filled, and she silently prayed the gods no tear was revealed since she still had her own pride to think of. But still, Hiccup timidly found her gaze "What do you say? Shall we \_finally\_ set a \_wedding\_ \_date\_?"

Without hesitating, Astrid didn't respond with words, but she did with a quick nod and immediately pressed her lips against his own. Hiccup laughed against her lips as they heard everyone around them cheer and the music to start joyfully once again. "Our first flight?" She asked against his lips before he pulled a little away from her, took the ring from her hand and gently slid it in her engagement finger.

Looking back at her, he snaked both arms around the small of her waist, pulled her closer and whispered against her lips, "Our \_first\_ \_flight\_." Confirming the meaning of the ring's drawing saved on its surface.

Hiccup locked her lips in his for a few more seconds before she gently broke their tender kiss and simply shared wishful stares.

Having this night, become \_officially\_ the very first one, counting up to three months until their \_wedding\_ \_day\_.

## 6. Behind The Eyes

She didn't recall falling asleep. She hadn't realized her clothes were taken away. "well, most of them anyway" she barely heard all the chattering around her fade away, the smell of mead, roasted meat and lit torches eased as time passed, but she didn't even realize it when her sense of smell diminished along with the fire. Not even the feel of having her weight on someone else's arms. "especially, not recalling that one last thing happening.

Her braid was disentangled, the only fabric she felt as a protective layer against immorality and dishonor was her dark scarlet shirt. Should stockings \_count\_ this time?

Rolling slightly on her left side, her back to the sunlight burning at the back of her shoulder, it didn't take her so long to know her body was resting within the comforts of her bed. Eyelids felt impossibly useless, so much, that the desire of opening them "and go on with her life" fought with how heavy they felt. Sore muscles. Workout outs, maybe? Yeah, perhaps training just a little too much...

Frankly, her muscles feeling sore wasn't a new thing for her. Astrid

sometimes pushed herself just a little too muchâ€"well, actually she pushed herself \_too\_ muchâ€"in order to continue carelessly with her competitive reputation.

Her ears alarmed her senses when the sound of curtains being held and carefully pulled to cover the sunlight caught her attention. It felt good not having that stingy and annoying sun ray mutilating the skin of her back. But she still hadn't opened her eyes nor turned to face whatever was wandering around in her room.

It could be her mother. Stormfly was completely out of the question since she was too big to fit in Astrid's room without bumping and falling into somethingâ€"not to mention, breaking somethingâ€"which was why she had her very own hut by the houseâ€"Unlike Toothless, who was small enough to have an exclusively reserved space up in Hiccup's loft.

Hiccupâ€|

What was the last thing they did together?

She hardly remembered him taking a shaky but strong and supportive hold of her hands, his lips seducing hers before pleasing them with moisten nervousness. How the crowd around them cheered at the view of their most treasurable pride gathering together, finally announcing a date to their official unionâ€"have they waited \_long enough\_?â€"Yet, those cheerful sounds were also missing in her memories, well, at least the part when they all came to an end.

Suddenly, gentle and warm fingers crashed on the skin protecting her cheekbones.

\_Those\_ \_fingers\_â€|

Definitely \_not\_ her mother's. Hels, her mother rarely even \_touched\_ Astrid unless it was a matter of having a deep and hurtful conversation relating her duties as a woman and warrior. Which were truly scarce since Astrid always turned out to bring constant satisfaction to the village and family.â€"Not to mention that she only goes home to sleep and eatâ€"

But these fingers were \_different\_. They were long, thin and callused. Probably because they worked with metal nearly all day long. Perhaps, or was it for cultivating cabbage?

\_No\_, this unique and imperfect smooth movement upon her flesh were definitely from working nearly all day long with metal.

Her eyes were about to flip open when a fingertip gently traced their figure as her lashes tickled against them.

Fingertips were replaced by phalanges running down her cheekbone, to her jawline, down the left of her chin and then again the length of his fingers were replaced by light fingertips, crushing against the dryness of her lips.

Astrid's lips twitched. The small space between her lips and nose, was more than just enough for her sense of smell to take in all the smoked charcoal in \_his\_ skin.

Yes, his. These were without doubt, the hands of a man.

That smell, that precautious touch, was all too familiar. Very much enjoyableâ€|too himâ€|

She hadn't needed to open her eyes to know he had been staring at her while touching her oh so dearly, studying her as she snoozed â€|or pretended toâ€|.

Her lips parted just enough to encase his fingertip and then push a weightless kiss against it.

"What if I were a barbarian?" He whispered. As if he didn't want her to break from her well faked slumber.

Her lips parted to linen a small smile against his still present fingers who danced as she responded in the same low tone as he did first, "Then you wouldn't have any fingers at all."

He let a slight laugh escape from him, entangled with a sudden loud exhale. His fingers trailed to her cheekbones, down to her jawline and then rested his palm against the skin of her neck, as if holding her head so she wouldn't pull away.

Her eyes finally fluttered open, to fall into an emerald enchantment that immediately froze her still. Her head slightly leaned into his touch, he smirked. "I believe I know you all too well to recognize you without having to rip your head out in the action."

He twitched, facetiously, "Ahâ€|" his head rolled as his eyes did "Good thing we've been through this for years already."

She just nodded in agreement. He had been right. Why argue with it?

Then, her eyes narrowed at the new thought that threatened to haunt her brain, "Aren't you supposed to be working in the village?"

He chuckled, "Things aren't as hectic as they used to be before yesterday and a few months ago."

Her brow raised in confusion, then he laughed humorlessly at that, dropping his hand from her face and bringing the other up to the back of his head, distractedly scratching the back of his neck. "Um, yeah, wellâ€|uhâ€|there isâ€|.ermâ€|wellâ€|" "

"Hiccup?" She cut him off, making him stop his usual babbles full of nonsense and look back down at her as she pushed herself upright against her elbows.

Hiccup drastically dropped his shoulders in surrender as he shifted his tender look on her to an apologetic one, "Well, things used to be harder while I got the hang of them. Thanks to all the new dragons, the construction is far ahead than what we all expected to. Which means we most likely be ready for when the winter storms hit the island. That, and I wanted previous plans to be accomplished on their originally scheduled due date no matter the circumstances. Which implies to what happened last night."

As he explained, she was still throwing this unique perplexed stare

at him. Making him chuckle and go on as she tilted her head to the side.

"Norse, please?" She said.

Hiccup pouted at her once he heard her. She then innocently smiled up at him.

He rolled his eyes and exhaled, "Fine." His hand absently began to crawl back up her forearm, to her shoulder and back down as his eyes got distracted by the trail his touch left on her cold skin and his lips limited the tone of his voice to a minimum. Making it slightly hard for her to catch, "I wanted everything I had planned for us before all this drama happened to be done without any interruptions or delays. Which is why I constantly got myself purposely busy. I wanted to defy time and the upcoming seasons." Finally, his hand halted on hers and laced their fingers together as his eyes located her own "The wedding date announcement, was actually my dad's idea. He wanted to do it on your birthday as a surprise. We designed the rings a while after that. I told him that it didn't matter if mine wasn't finished for the night of your birthday. As long as I had yours done. Mine could always wait. I had also informed him that I wanted our house to be done by then, or at least by a few weeks before our wedding day. So I've been working on it as well. But now that nearly everything that has to do with surprising you on a specific day is finally over..." he joked, making her pout before smirking back at him "...things can go a little smoother."

Astrid bit on her lower lip. Not really knowing how to put her apprehensions in simple, humorless words. Though even with Hiccup, being humorless was totally out of the question and they had made it quite clear to everyone around them. But she still tried her best not to allow others to confuse her good sense of humor and tender side while with Hiccup, for weakness. That wasn't part of the plan and she sure as Hel wouldn't allow that to happen. Which was why she tried to keep it just between her and Hiccup. After all, he was the one responsible for unlocking that caring and tender side of her from the first time he pleaded her to allow him to show what it felt like to be on a dragon's back—five years ago.

"But Hiccup, do you really want to move to our own house?" She cleared on her throat.

He rose a brow, "Don't you?"

"Well, yeah, of course but—"

"Astrid?" He pouted.

For a moment, by the look in his eyes, she thought he was thinking she might be stepping back at the idea of getting married. She had to stop that thought at any cost, so she quickly shook on her head in sudden denial, "Hold up, it's not what you're about to think, Hiccup. All I'm trying to say, is that I don't think it would be the best idea to move out together, by ourselves—so soon."

Hiccup couldn't be more confused. His head tilted to the side, waiting for her to just go on so he could have at least another chance to figure out the true meaning of her words.

Astrid sighed, exasperated, "I'm talking about your \_mom\_, Hiccup."

"What about my mum?" He blinked.

"Well, we just got her to stay here with us in Berk. Don't you think moving out after just a few months of having her around for the first time, would be just a little \_too\_ \_much\_? I mean, she just lost your dad, not having you wandering through the same rooms as she, could be quite painful."

His head was thrown aback at the realization of it and his eyes searched for absolutely nothing through her bedroom.

Astrid's hand slowly slipped from his and made its way up his arm, until she reached his chin and turned his face to hers. "Not that I don't want to have \_my\_ \_own\_ home with my husband, of course." She whispered grinning at him.

He still seemed a little at unease by that last argument, "What do you suggest then?" His voice was slightly sharp all of the sudden.

She frowned at how that sounded and just when her lips parted, making way for new words to be released from her voice, he spoke again with the same dead toned terseness that suddenly haunted him, "I \_want\_ to marry you before winter, Astrid."

She chuckled and cupped his face in her hands, "I \_know\_ that, Hiccup. I'm just saying it's not a good idea to push your mother aside like that."

"I've pushed \_you\_ aside."

She shook her head, "That doesn't count, Hiccup. I was being selfish and you were just worn out by all the sudden responsibilities. I allowed arrogance to take over common sense and that's it. I didn't know the reasons behind it and now that I do, I could care less for it. Your mother is \_different\_. She needs \_you\_ now more than I do."

He took in what seemed like a difficult deep breath through his nostrils as she held him still in her hands, "What would you suggest then?" He repeated the question, this time, his voice fell into a deep and very low-toned surrender.

Her eyes reflected the huge smile that traced her lips at his question, so innocent and adventurous as usual.

"We move to \_your\_ house for a while."

Hiccup's glare was dead, "Astrid, I sleep in a \_loft\_."

"So what?"

"So what?" Hiccup took a small grip on both of her wrists and pulled her hands away from him "Astrid, there isn't \_any\_ space up there for a newlywed couple. Toothless sleeps there with me and \_nothing\_ will make him go elsewhere so we could have our own \_privacy\_."

She chuckled and tilted her head to the side.

He just shook his head in denial, dropping his gaze from hers, "Not to mention, it would feel weird getting away with matrimonial desires and rights when my mom sleeps right below us. \_No\_ \_way\_, Astrid. That is \_out\_ of the question."

"But, Hiccup. You do realize we can build up a wall that could make your room much more private, right?"

"No."

"A door, maybe later?" She smiled tentatively.

"No."

"Oh, come on, Hiccup!" She sat up straight now, her legs trapping his waist between them "It's a great way to start off our marriage. Just \_think\_ about it!"

"I already made my choice, Astrid."

Astrid frowned and slightly pushed him backwards, catching him off guard as his back fell flat against her bed and her body was soon straddling on his hips—the hard way. Her hands quickly pinned his arms to the back of his head. He groaned at the sudden weight change.

"\_I'm\_ making the decision." She said sneering at him.

He glared up at her "Don't you have \_any\_ \_more\_ ideas? One that might be a lot more considerable, maybe?"

"We can be \_quiet\_ while making love." She then suggested.

Hiccup's blood suddenly heated up and his cheeks weren't pale anymore. They contrasted a violent shade of red.  
"Um—huh?"

Giggling within her, "I said—" she leaned down to his neck, brushing her lips against his skin and then tracing them up to his ear "—we can always be quiet while making love." Her lips nipped on his earlobe, sending shivers down his entire body, making it react on certain places he didn't really \_want\_ to have at the moment considering their current position and the fact she had thin layers on.

Brushing her moist lips down his cheekbone to his lips, she kissed him gently, trapping his upper lip on both of hers then switching to the lower before tracing the tip of her tongue on his lower lip to ease the usual dryness in them and just when his lips finally reacted to take her in, she pulled back.

"No one will ever know when we sleep and when we \_don't\_."

"Do you \_really\_ have to use bold words for this kind of conversation?"

She laughed, "What? Are you embarrassed?"



Hiccup frowned at her, "Who said anything about being embarrassed?!"

"Your reddened cheeks." She stared at him lamely as she released his arms and pointed at his now scarlet appearance.

He burnt even more at that. So much, his entire body trembled underneath her. His head turned to the side, as if that would hide the sight of his intense blushing from her.

She just laughed and then pecked on his nose, "You know, you have to face the fact that we soon will have to give in to those kinds of cravings." She whispered.

He tried not to choke on that, "Yeah, and when \_that\_ happens, the least I would want is to keep silence."

She pulled back enough to have a perfect view of him and tilted her head to the side, "How are you so sure about that?"

He still wouldn't look at her, "I've herd thingsâ€|"

She frowned, "\_Things\_?"

Snapping his eyes back at her, instantly realizing how his words might have filtered in her thoughts, she crossed her arms over her chest, almost snarling at him.

"N-not what \_you're\_ thinking, Astrid, so hold that thought right there for a second, okay?!"

She huffed, "Can you read minds now?"

"No. But I know how \_jealous\_ and fearsome you might get over something as simple as a \_misunderstanding\_."

"Then say something to support your argument before I break your arm and toss you out of my window like a sheet of paper."

"Ouchâ€|" he muttered with a hurtful expression at the image suddenly formed in his head of her performing out her threat and then shook it off as soon as possible, "I've heard things from the other guys. As in, Gobber, Snotlout, Tuffnut, Fishlegs and even my \_dad\_."

She rose a brow.

"Yeah, I know it sounds crazy." He said, "But it's \_true\_."

"Really? And what have they said?"

"Wellâ€| can you please get off me first? I would love to make things last a little more before we ruin any chances of being \_descent\_ for the very first time\_."

She rolled her eyes and without a word, climbed off of him, sitting right beside him, her back flat against the headboard, one leg tossed over the other, and both hands resting on her thighs after bringing the covers back up to her waist. Her eyes sharp at him, longing for a \_reasonable\_ explanation.

He sat back up and scratched the back of his head before scooting a little closer to her side, resting a hand over hers and slightly playing with their fingers. "It's just guy talk, Astrid. The kind of talk I would much rather let a Whispering Death eat me alive instead of having to hear some more of it."

"What do they say about that?"

"Well, that at first, it might hurt you. After hearing that, every time we get close enough to call into those inner desires, those words come back into my head and the thought of hurting you just makes me retreat" he looked up at her "keep it to the same cuddles and embraces we usually have." That last part, he whispered it so low, she had to lean a little closer to catch it all in.

She frowned again, "I don't feel pain, Hiccup."

Hiccup just rolled his eyes, "I know you don't like the sound of it, Astrid, but it's true."

She shrugged, "I still don't want to leave your mom alone for so long." Finally concluded.

They both fell in utter silence after that. She was right though, they were both right. She was thinking about preventing hurting Valka and Hiccup was thinking about trying to make their first time as equally enjoyable as possible for both of them.

After a few seconds of just silence between them"probably upgraded to a few minutes instead" Hiccup took in a deep breath and dropped his gaze to their still entangled fingers on her lap, "Tell you what, we spend the first few days of our honeymoon in our new home. Alone, just the two of us. No visitors unless during the day and no dragons sleeping in our room. After those first days are over, we can move back to my mom's."

Astrid looked back up at him and couldn't help but to send him a sweet smile and a light squeeze on his hand, "That sounds better."

He smiled back at her. Of course, he still didn't enjoy the idea on sleeping, loving, comforting or even pleasuring his wife under the same roof as his mother. It terrified him the fact that soon he'd have to take responsibility as a husband as well, but that didn't bother him as much since he was already so used to assist his lady on whatever she desired. Over the years, it turned to be a pleasing hobby instead of a painful drift since she scarcely punched him now. As much as he enjoyed being punched every now and then by her"as long as he knew she did so with good intentions"he had to admit, that he loved much more all of her affections towards him. It just felt great to him.

Now he just had to take in the idea of living with his wife and mother under the same roof without worrying on whether his mother might catch them during their love session one day. The thought of it only made him shiver in terror.

Though, the worry eased as soon as he felt her head fall on his shoulder and her arm snake around his waist, bringing him slightly

closer to her with a firm squeeze on his hip and then loosened until she moved her other hand on his stomach and got comfortable by him. He smiled, not really helping it and moved to kiss her slightly messy hair while moving his hand up her arm, searching for her face. His thumb rubbing on her jawline.

Astrid looked up at him as she felt his hand gently move her head to his direction and soon, his lips were gently crashing into hers. "Say, Hiccup?" She mumbled against his lips.

"Hm?"

"\_How\_ did I get here last night?"

He pulled back from the kiss and faintly laughed at the sudden question. "I brought you here."

She tilted her head innocently confused, "How?"

"Well, I \_carried\_ you."

"Why?!" her eyes wide in disbelief.

"Because you fell asleep before you could walk yourself home."

She blinked. "But, I didn't drink that much."

"No, but we \_did\_ dance nearly all night. When you finally decided to settle down, you were already struggling to keep yourself awake. So I took you outside and when we were passing by the forge, you began mumbling on how dizzy you felt. I offered myself to carry you home. You refused to let me, of course."

"And?"

He then deviously grinned at her, "Who said I \_ever\_ listened?"

She revolved her eyes.

"So, I brought you home. By the time we reached your house, you were already asleep. I took you up here and made you comfortable for bed. \_That's\_ \_it\_."

"Did you stay here all night?"

He shook his head. "I left. Came back earlier to check up on you. You were still asleep so I decided to wake you. Your mom had already left when I got here."

She just nodded. Hiccup gripped on her hand in a flash, gifting her another tender smile, leaned to peck on her temples and moved to climb off her bed.

As hard as she tried to remember everything she missed out on the previous night after Hiccup announced their official marriage dateâ€œfinallyâ€œshe just, \_couldn't\_.

It annoyed her how frustrating it was not to remember dancing with her future husband all nightâ€œwithout apparently including alcoholâ€œ

As she dug deeper into her memories, Astrid's eyes wandered around her room without a single intention in halting anywhere specific. Then, her hands heavily rose to her hair and imagining herself in front of a mirror, she began braiding her hair.

She has done that so many times before that she could now do it blindfolded. Hiccup got distracted with whatever his eyes were searching for as they adventured through the village from Astrid's window. The village seemed quiet, few souls wandered the grounds carrying either two sheep, wood, or empty buckets for fishing.

Astrid took this chance to find her clothes laying neatly on the desk on the left corner of her room, slipped off her bed and took a quick hold of her skirt, sliding it up her legs.

"Hey, Astrid?" Hiccup asked and turned slightly around, finding her buckling her skirt. His tongue entangled with \_who\_ \_knows\_ \_what\_ in his mouth, his breath was cut short and suddenly all of the blood endlessly pumping in and out his heart began boiling down through his veins and arteries. Faster than ever, he found his eyes averted elsewhere, to give her some well-deserved privacy as his hand shakily scratched the sides of his neck. Then he continued with a shaky-low tone "Um, ca-can I ask you a favor?"

"Mm?" her eyes shifted from her boots to him as she slid them on "What is?"

"You know the clans are to arrive these days right?"

"Mhm." Fixing her headband, using her favorite silver shield to see her reflection.

"Well, I was hoping you could be in charge of today's meeting."

This caught her completely off guard. Hiccup always demanded her presence right by his side in every meeting at the Great Hall, but he hadn't asked her to \_lead\_ the meetings. This made her stop lacing on her pearly-fury hood jacket and pay absolute attention to him.

Her silence made him slowly turn around to face her and immediately pierced his eyes in hers. His lips were perfectly lined and his slightly lifted brows made a clear impression that he might feel somewhat hurt by what he was about to say.

She just waited for him to finish.

"I wanted to take off and have a ride with mom." He finally gave in to the sigh that carried the words in it "It's been a while since I lastly rode Toothless and I know mom's been busy helping Gobber with the new dragons. So I was just wondering ifâ€"

His lips cut off the trail of a suddenly uncontrolled babble as soon as his eyes found her once again. This time, she had dropped her sight to the floor and her hands were closed tightly into fists. Her teeth were mutilating her lowest lip, her bangs draped over her eyes.

Perhaps, Astrid hadn't realized her own reactions at that previous

asking until his hand gently found hers and unhurriedly stomped on the floor toward her, as if he were excessively careful, step by step, until his fingers gently trailed down her fist and her eyes blinked twice at him in realization. Hadn't she noticed how much she disliked the fact that he would rather fly off through the clouds with his mother than with her? Or, was it the thought of not being able to have him as a backup if something at the meeting went wrong?

"Heyâ€|" he whispered, trying to find her eyes through all the hair hiding them in "Astrid?"

Finally, her head rose along with his as she heard the sound of her name dripping some sense of tenderness from his lips.

"I know we haven't spent much time together either, but, Iâ€"Iâ€" "

"I know, Hiccup." She said in a dry mid-whisper, not really in the mood to hear any kind of senseless apologies. Her lips beginning to form a weak smile "Don't drag me back into the issue, Hiccup. It's not that we haven't spent much time together. I'm okay with covering up for you, as always. It's just thatâ€|"

"What?" He asked softly raising his free hand to her chin and rubbing his thumb against her lips.

"What if something goes wrong? What if we welcome the clans for the time being and they don't accept? We would have another war upon us and Berk cannot afford to have another attack, right now. We barely stood well after Drago and all of his monstrous iced attack. Plus, winter is nearly by the corner. And what ifâ€" "

"Shhâ€|" His index finger replaced his thumb on her lips, sealing them together as he leaned closer "Everything will be alright, Astrid."

He then chuckled after seeing her just staring at his eyes, somewhat unconvinced. Then he went on. "I know you're strong and capable enough to handle one single meeting. And I know we will have that alliance well granted before we know it. And, I also know winter will come in easy this year."

She pouted, abhorred, "Are you Odin?"

He laughed and shook his head, "No, but since we have rebuilt nearly all forts and houses, winter won't be so hard to get through this year."

She frowned, "And what about the alliance?"

He just shrugged, "I guess we will have to be patient until we find out."

"Seriously, Hiccup. Not helping."

He just smirked and pecked her on the lips "Will you cover for me then?"

"Hmâ€|" she teased against his lips, humming as if she were

\_considering\_ it.

Hiccup chuckled and kissed her again, this time a little deeper "I'll return early enough to have a private dinner with you." He offered.

She grinned, "Will \_you\_ do the cooking?"

He pulled back, making a slightly horrified expression at her, "Are you kidding me? Of course \_I\_ will do the cooking. Don't want any of us to end up sick!" he teased.

She chuckled loudly annoyed and drew her hand back from his hold and fisted strongly against his sides. Making him growl and breathlessly cough for some oxygen as he backed from her, rubbing on his side. "H-h-hey!"

She grinned, grabbed her axe and started walking to the exit, "That's for making fun of my cooking skills."

\* \* \*

><p>The reunion wasn't at all exciting. Astrid took charge all afternoon as they just discussed Berk's progress throughout the past two months after battle with Drago. No one enjoyed recalling that horrible experience, but it somehow had to be brought up as a subject in nearly every meeting since that was the reason why everyone in the island happened to be suddenly drowned within a bottomless ocean of duties. Although all homes were finally rebuilt in less than what they've all expected, and now they were focusing on the smallest detailsâ€"like getting rid of the last bits of ice left around the islandâ€"there was still <em>something</em> they had to begin paying much more attention nowâ€|

Three different clans from not so far from Berk, had sent their requests to be welcomed in the village to discuss some kind of treaty in order to make their side of the archipelago much safer against future foreign invasions. The clans were already warned that Berkians enjoyed some dragon companionship every now and then, and apparently, they didn't dislike the idea. But that doesn't confirm that they agree with it as well. Truth was, Hiccup never received a letter from any of the clans that would respond to his warning of having Dragons within their population. So this could basically mean that he just had to get comfortable enough by just waiting and see what happens.

\* \* \*

><p>After having Hiccup announce the official marriage date, Astrid's levels of selfishness and jealousy had gradually decreased. Best said, they were well <em>replaced</em> by a new nail in the bone. As she stared far at the horizon, watching carefully how the three foreign ships gradually sailed closer to Berk's coast by the hour, she had forgotten how angry it made her to think that Hiccup had been taking her for granted for the past few monthsâ€"or taking her for a \_ghost\_, better said.

But this time, it was all \_different\_. Astrid had new things that now invaded her thoughts. As she stared wordlessly at the ships, her hand held tightly onto her Axe as she remembered most of the things Goober

had said last night after sending everyone back to their homesâ€œAfter the meetingâ€œ". \_"Yer sure this ou'ta be a good idea?"\_

"\_No. But it's what Berk needs for the moment, Gobber." Astrid responded while making her way out of the Great Hall.\_

"\_Aye, I agree on that lass. Tis their reaction to the fact that we love dragons that worries me."\_

"\_I know. But right now, expecting anything is the only chance we have. Berk needs some support from the other clans. At least while we regain our rightful strength." \_

And that was it. After that, Gobber just nodded in an unconvinced agreement. Astrid knew how he felt, she \_also\_ felt it. As much as creating a new alliance would appear to be a good idea, there was still something within it that didn't quite convince Astrid either. Yet, they all knew that Berk's safety came on the very top of the list. So for the moment, all they had left was to bite on their tongues, wait, and see what is to come.

"You're still here."

Astrid glanced over her shoulder at the sounds of words floating to her ears and noticed Eret emerging from the shadows within the woods behind her and stood right beside her. Her head turned back to the ships.

"What are \_you\_ doing here?" She asked. Cold as always.

"Well I am good, though it could be lot better if it weren't for Ruffnut trying to sniff my butt every time she gets a chance now, thank you for asking."

Astrid simply stared at him. Clearly emitting the kind of message that made it obvious that she wasn't in the best mood to have a piece of Eret's usual sense of humor.

He then shrugged it off, "Fishlegs granted a twenty minute break so I decided to go wander off."

Astrid twitched, "\_Twenty\_ minute break?!" She quoted in an obviously displeased tone as her eyes sharply stabbed back at Eret.

She and Hiccup had left Fishlegs in charge of the Academy for the past few days since neither of them were able to train the dragons. For the moment, Astrid and Hiccup had agreed to leave the Academy in Fishlegs' hands while she takes over alongside Hiccup whilst Berk had visitors in grounds. Yet, she wasn't happy to know how \_flexible\_ the boy was turning out to be. A twenty minute break was painfully too much compared to the five seconds Astrid usually grantedâ€œand that was \_only\_ whenever she was in a generous mood.

"Anyway, never got to congratulate you and the chief."

"For?" Astrid rose a brow at him.

Eret chuckled, "For the marriage, of course!"

She turned her gaze back at the ships, which were a lot closer to the docks now. "We've been engaged for two years. Everyone knows that."

"Not me! I expected you two to simply be together." He lied. Of course he knew they were previously engaged. It was just something he had brought himself to believe as a false fact after seeing Astrid all alone most of the time.

She just bit on her lower lip. Her glare at the ships just made it clear to Eret that she wasn't even paying any attention to him. So he followed her gaze and just silenced himself. "I have a bad feeling about this." She muttered.

"Huh? The wedding you say?" Eret asked, clueless.

"No. All of this." She ghostly replied. "I can't put my Axe into it, but I don't like this stingy feeling growing within me."

Then, her eyes shifted from the docks and past Eret as she turned on her heels and started walking back to town, "Forget the training break. Come along."

Eret didn't complain. In fact, he'd rather clean the dragon stables before going back to the arena and have Ruffnut inspect him every five minutes against his will. So he followed his lady-chief.

Not a word was said as they made their way down the hill. He just followed her, struggling with the feels that ran through his entire body as his eyes rebelliously searched her whole backside and his brain pulled him helplessly back into the memory of her glowingly paled bare figure. It was somewhat difficult to believe that the delicate and angelic features he had savored a few days back at the wilderness, actually belonged to this strong and humorless warrior walking before him.

He had to make an effort into remembering how a human should swallow correctly when his eyes fell on his chief once they reached the ports. Hiccup was standing still by the first harbor on their left, waiting to help settle the ropes as the ship got closer. Astrid stood beside him and Eret kept his distance from her fair enough to help anchoring the other ships.

"Ah, Stoick the Vast's one and only son, at last we meet!" A hefty, tall, dark haired man exclaimed with arms wide open as he climbed from the first ship.

"Welcome to Berk, Osch." Hiccup greeted, slightly bowing his head in respect.

Osch rested both hands on his sides and inhaled some of Berk's salty-beach fresh air as he glanced at his taller surroundings. "Aye, nice village of yours lad. I see ye've done very well in recovering from all damage."

"We do our best, Osch." Hiccup replied "I hope your stay in Berk becomes very pleasant."

"Aye, me as well lad." He patted on the scrawny boy's shoulder, hard enough to make him stumble on his own feet "me as well."



Astrid rose a brow as soon as she finished observing on everyone climbing off the other two ships. She noticed that every men in them were ordinarily from the same tribe. No chiefly-looking around. Besides that, she had just realized that the sails on every foreign ship in their docks were designed the same way; with two blades crossed over a shield surrounded with dark fire. "Where are the other two clans we were supposed to meet?"

Osch seemed suddenly stunned as he noticed the young lady before him, "They'll probably arrive later." Hiccup answered, shifting his gaze back at her. Still, she didn't look at any of them until she heard a slight snort coming from Osch.

"And \_who\_ may this fine young lass be?" Osch asked.

Hiccup managed to glance back at their visitor, his hand slowly moving to signal her figure, "Right, um, Osch, \_this\_ is Astrid. The best female warrior Berk has ever had, yet."

"Warrior eh," Osch rubbed at his chin in disbelief as he examined the girl from the last strand of hair on her head the tip of her fury boots. "Hard to believe such a fine lady would weight as you claim. But no doubt she could be a well suited \_wife\_."

Astrid rose a brow at what she had just heard. She wanted to make herself believe her ears were just running through some kind of sudden hearing obstructions. "\_Excuse\_ \_me\_?"

Osch nodded, "Right, yer not married lass, correct?" Before Astrid would even bring herself to slit her lips open and spill some verbal sense into the old man's hairy head for once and all, Osch had turned his back on both of them and called back at the distance "Young Billus! Get yer trunk down here, eh!"

When both, Hiccup and Astrid moved a few steps to take a better look at the one man on the second ship passing a barrel to Eret who placed it on the ground at a safe side where no one would trip over it and make a fool out of themselves for the rest of their trip. The villager made a quick leap off the ship and walked toward the chiefs.

He was as tall as Eret, a little beefier than Snotlout, curly dark brown hair that fell over his sweaty-paled-bare-shoulders, and loosened bangs hovering over his eyelashes. He had a blue tattoo over his exposed left chest, in the shape of a bear paw. Deep ocean blue eyes. The lad was wearing dark brown leggings, black fury boots, a ripped dark brown tunic and a black furred cape now hanging from his right forearm before he would throw it over his shoulders.

Osch threw an arm over the boy's acromion and pulled him closer. Osch was four times taller than the new stranger though. "Chief, allow me to introduce ye my eldest son, \_Billus\_."

Billus' lips formed a prideful grin at them both and then his gaze suddenly landed on the serious lady standing faithfully by the chief's side but who was paying much more attention to what was being taken out of the ships and into Berk's grounds.

It had taken her aback when her hand was suddenly taken from her and

brought directly toward strange, newly moisten lips. Her eyes flashed at Billus, who was carelessly swabbing his lips on the back of her hand. Her lips twisted and a sudden sound of disgust escaped from her mouth as she immediately pulled her hand back to the safety of her personal space, hid it behind her back and rubbed it clean against her clothes, trying to swallow back down the nauseating feeling growing within her stomach and threatening to burst out from her body in no time.

"Nice meeting you, Billus. Welcome to our home. I'm Hiccup, and she is Astrid."

"Always a delight to meet new citizens. Especially ladies as beautiful as ye." No doubt that his response had been originally meant for Hiccup, but his eyes were entirely grounded in Astrid. Scanning her curves and recording every single movement her breasts made underneath her scarlet shirt with every breath she drew in and out.

She glared. Hiccup might have felt the tension growing between them and chuckled and immediately rested a hand behind her back, "Well! Why don't we go further into the village? I would personally show you around before the feast."

Osch shook his head "No feast tonight, Hiccup. I want to discuss the treaty before celebrating anything."

"Why so eager?" Astrid spat.

Hiccup tried to keep himself from glaring at her sudden coarse tone.

Osch simply relaxed his shoulders, "I have come to certain conditions in order to accept the alliance between our lands. After an agreement is settled, then we may celebrate as much as you please."

Both, Hiccup and Astrid shared a surprised glance and then looked back at Osch and his son, "Very well then." Hiccup agreed. Before any other word was to be said, the four of them were heading up into the village, willing to twist on their plans for a while. After all, it was best to get on with the treaty signing as soon as possible.

\* \* \*

><p>"I want each and every one of you at the meeting tonight. So go home so you may rest a while." Astrid said while standing straight back in the center of the arena. The students and trainers forming a wide circle around her. Valka was on her far right and Ruffnut on her far left.<p>

"But, we haven't finished today's lessons. It's not even midday Astrid." Fishlegs said while running on Meatlug's heavy jaw.

"Exactly. Quite enough time to get this place cleaned up and go home before the gathering." Astrid responded.

"Are you saying, that we get to do nothing but clean up dragon shit until sundown?" Tuffnut vaguely asked. Astrid just stared abhorredly at him, he then smiled wide and rose both arms in triumph "Awesome!

Now I get to toss some at the guards!"

Ruffnut just nodded mischievously at her brother's idea.

Snotlout rubbed on his beard, "Hm, I am flattered to know you and Hiccup still consider our presence at meetings. You never know when you'll need the wise opinion of a strong leader." He showed his beefy biceps.

"I truly hope you're talking about someone other than yourself, Snotlout." Fishlegs muttered.

She just sighed in exasperation. "Just do as I said and suspend class for the day. Clean up the arena and go home. We'll meet at the Great Hall \_tonight\_." Everyone else remained silent. The twins groaned when Astrid pointed at the messy piles of wood around the ground for them to pick up. Snotlout smirked, fixed on his vest and followed Ruffnut like a stranded puppy. Fishlegs moved on with Meatlug picking up the wooden obstacles they used for training. Eret moved the barrels and placed them inside the supply caves along with the boxes of armory.

Astrid exhaled aloud, not really meaning to reveal her uneasiness when she suddenly felt Valka's hand rest on her shoulder and grip on her gently.

She glanced back at Hiccup's mother and saw a glimpse of comfort in her eyes. Making Astrid's lips weakly form a heavy smile back at her.

Valka had started training with them. She was now second in command after Fishlegs and third after Astrid at the Academy. But that was just while she took the hang of things. Valka could take Astrid's place at Dragon Training if she ever decided to give in her training duties and become Hiccup's absolute right hand.

Even though Astrid felt slightly at unease by Valka's arrival in their lives once again, she had grown to enjoy having her around. It astounded her how amazingly adventurous this woman turned out to be. Defying her age and all the rules that would apply to a graceful housewife. It reminded her a lot of Hiccup. So full of life and breathing freedom wherever she went. She was just a female version of Hiccup himself. The kind of mother that unlike her own, she knew when to be soft and comprehensive with them. On the other hand, Astrid's mother was always as strict and firm as a rock. Even though Astrid wouldn't dare show her true soft side to anyone but Hiccup, there were a few moments within the privacy between she and Valka, where she could just lower down her guard and not behave like a selfish emotionless monster. But that was \_just\_ at times. Basically whenever she didn't really have strengths left to behave like a solid rock in order to hide her true feelings.

"Let's go." Valka said.

Astrid nodded and walked by her side out of the arena.

\* \* \*

><p>That evening, Valka promised Hiccup she'd be early at the Great Hall, getting things in order along with Goober for when the reunion

came to a start. Hiccup, on the other hand, spent nearly all afternoon touring the new visitors and expecting someone like Mulch or Bucket to tell him the other two expected clans had arrived. But no news other than the ones he already knew came to the light.<p>

He was now standing behind his silver shield, back in his room. Carefully running his knife over the skin of his chin to at least try and trim down those stubborn short locks that wouldn't come out no matter how many times he'd tryâ€”

\_Knock, knockâ€|.knock. \_

"Ah!" His hands quickly pulled back from his face as soon as he heard someone knocking on the door. Glancing not towards the door, but at his reflection in the shield, looking for any signs of skin slit in two, he sighed in relief while rubbing on his still slightly hairy jawline "\_That\_ was close."

"Hiccup?" \_Her\_ voice made his eyes widen at his reflection. Hearing the front door slowly crack open, his hold on the knife loosened as his feet slowly brought him to the edge of his loft, where he could have a nice view of nearly the rest of the house. Hiccup still couldn't believe how she could \_want\_ this exposed loft to be \_their\_ newlywed bedroom.

\_Only in Hel's grave would I agree to thatâ€|\_ He thought.

Smiling, once he saw her head peak in first, her lips bucked up as if she was about to kiss a rock and her fingers gently holding onto the door as she made her way in. "Hiccup?" She called again.

That was when he noticed he'd been watching her in sheer silence for maybe too long "Up here."

Her head popped up and smiled wide at the sight of him standing nearly above her. She closed the door behind her and rushed herself up the stairs to the loft. He just watched her approach him and while still holding the knife in one hand, he extended his other hand to take hers in and bring her closer once she reached the last step. "Thought I'd see you at the gathering."

Astrid nodded and rested her free hand on his chest once he brought her closer "I wanted to check if you were ready."

Chuckling, Hiccup shook his head, "I'm halfway done." He assured "Did you get any rest?"

She shook her head and pulled back from him, beginning to wander around his room. "Not really. My mom wanted me to find some good logs, then Stormfly demanded some quality time with her favorite girl." That last part, pride shamelessly dripped from her lips. "By the time I wanted to lay down for a while, meeting was in less than an hour."

Hiccup just watched her as she spoke and followed the movements of her hand absently brushing against his bed covers, up to his side table, the corners of the window, down to his silver shield and finally fell back to her side as she walked back to him. She didn't seem tired, though. She just lookedâ€| \_Astrid\_.

Before he would bring himself to say something, Astrid frowned once her eyes met his face and her cold fingers soon touched the rough skin of his cheeks, jawline and chin. "Hiccup, are you a ten year old?"

He stared wearied at her, "Depends. What do you do to ten year olds?"

She snickered, "What I mean is, how come you don't shave better?"

He sighed and rolled his eyes once he felt her other hand gently take the knife from him, "Probably because beard is a terrible and thick enemy?"

She just shook her head as she grabbed the small rock he used to polish the knife which he kept by the shield. Then she leaned back against the wall and polished the knife herself.

Hiccup took advantage of time to finish buckling on his pants. Astrid just watched him. Her cheeks undoubtedly turned a faded pink as a result on how fast her heart suddenly began racing. She couldn't believe she would have to watch him dress up every single morning and undress every single evening, soon enough. Still, it was odd to think they've faced carnal temptations before with each other and never got to go further than what was basically allowable. Yet, that didn't take away the fact that she'd secretly desired to become one soul with her beloved ever since she realized how much she cared for him. Surprising how his caring signs, caresses and even the distance between them for the past few months had kept them from going all the way down with their desires. To give in to their carnal cravings and simply forget and break all the rules that bind them into near perfection. He was wearing a light tunic. But no doubt, was he waiting to be shaved in order to finish getting dressed so he wouldn't get old-fallen hair on his clean clothes.

As he slid on his boot, Astrid pushed herself away from the wall and walked back toward him, "Where's Toothless?"

"Oh, he's with mom and Cloudjumper. She insisted in giving me some alone time before the meeting."

She faked a cough, "Yeah, I don't think you're completely alone right now." She teased with a grin and placed a hand gently underneath his chin and lifted his face just enough for her to get a perfect look on his unshaved skin. Then, she used her other hand to run the newly polished knife carefully over his skin. He swallowed nervously at the cold feeling of sharp knives being controlled by his violent girlfriend.

He stayed silent for a while as he allowed her to shave him. As a sign that he was actually enjoying her assistance, his heart began to rebelliously race between his lungs as he stared up at the distance. "This isâ€¦umâ€¦this, feels really nice." He mumbled.

She just smiled and continued shaving him in silence. As a matter of fact, she was also enjoying it.

"Astrid, you do know why I shave, right?"

"Because you grow very little hair and have no choice but to even the

paleness of your skin?" She teased.

He chuckled and rolled his eyes, "Ha, ha. Very funny." Sarcasm "But no. It's not that. I could simply just let it grow like any other Viking."

"Then why don't you?"

He stayed silent for a few seconds that nearly felt like hours before she removed her hold from his chin and tilted his head to the side so she could go on shaving the uneasy lines of his jawline.

"Because you like it this way." Bright emerald eyes locked within ocean blue glory once her hand moved from his face and the knife was far enough for him to lean into her.

It felt incredible how those eyes grew darker as she aged. He remembered those clear sky blue jewels he used to dream about when she just gazed at him whenever he did some kind of stupidity in the village—which was actually most of the time, she just turned out to be an expert in keeping her thoughts and actions to herself—the many times they flew off to the far off distance, continue discovering new islands and staying nearly all day long far away with their dragons. Having her lay on his lap, gazing at the skies while he secretly stared at those two huge blue iris.

Hiccup swore, within the intimacy of his own solitude, that if he ever had a daughter, those blue eyes would be his only wish in her features. That every time he would glimpse into her whenever he played with her, he could find those two gems that remind him so much of the woman he had always loved. But—that was just his very\_  
own\_ secret now.

Before he knew it, his lips were already brushing against hers. Astrid's grip on the knife began losing its power and soon slipped down her fingertips as soon as she felt his hand snake around the small of her waist and pull her closer into a tender kiss. His newly shaved face was now cupped in her hand while the other kept him closer by his shoulder.

The irony, when her feet stood on the tip of her toes just to try and be of his level. It was impossible now. No matter how tall she would try to stand on her toes, he would always had to lean down to her. But as much as this fact annoyed her, it actually amused him in every loving way. Which was why he wrapped both arms around her waist, trapped her in a tight embrace and slightly raised her to him.

She chuckled against the kiss, knowing his movements were just meant to tease her for being the short one now that they were adults.

Hiccup grinned and deepened the kiss. His tongue began poking on her lips, as if they were knocking on her door, begging for some hospitality. She parted her lips and encased his tongue in them before releasing it and adventuring the insides of his entry while feeling her knees begin warning her into failing their duties and simply have her collapse on the ground. But before she would give in to the shakiness his hot body emitted to hers, his knees began pushing hers backwards until she nearly fell on her butt against the furs of his bed.

Pulling back from the kiss, his now dark, lustful eyes stared at her once again as a hand rose from her waist and up to her cheeks, rubbing them gently while slowly laying her on her back and his knees climbed upon her, trapping her frozen body underneath his.

Was this \_it\_? Had all these years of waiting so long, come to the final moment when they would give in to their lustful desires?

\_No, we have done this beforeâ€¦ many times, before.â€¦" \_She thought. And she wasn't wrong. They have cuddled and eaten each other in kisses beforeâ€¦ every time they got some extra alone time, to be exact.

Yet, every time they gave in to a kissing feast between each other, it felt as if it were the very first time they shared lips and skin all at once. He would take her to the skies with every kiss, every trail his fingertips left on her skin.

Her hand groped on his hair and soon got lost in it as she stared into his eyes, absently biting on her lower lip until he slowly leaned back down into her and instead of going for her lips once again, they then trailed down the skin of her neck as he slowly pushed her fur jacket from her chest and unlaced it with impressive speed.

Her legs relaxed underneath his body as her other hand adventured his entire back until her fingers found the hem of his tunic and then hid her hand within it, making her blood boil even faster at the touch of his warm skin against hers. He let out a soft moan as he felt her cold palm going up and down to the sides of his chest. By the time she had rose his tunic enough for him to pull back from her and take it off, she was already armor-less.

Hiccup let her help him take his tunic off and as she took a strong grip of it, while staring up at him, she brought the tunic to her chest before placing it beside her on the bed.

The young man leaned back into her and snaked a hand down her sides, along her waist as his lips buried themselves in the bridge of her collarbone and gently nipped on it. The sudden uncoordinated absent movements between his hips and hers, gradually rose her skirt high enough for him to feel the skin burning underneath her leggings. Sooner than she would imagine, a sudden bulge against her aching spot began to throb.

She let out a slight moan and pulled him closer, raising her thighs to his sides and pressing them against him in order to have him tight against her once again.

"Ahâ€¦ Asâ€¦ Astridâ€¦" he mumbled within strong sighs trying to resist himself from ripping her leggings apart and simply have her right then and there.

She didn't accept his resistance and simply pulled him back into a strong kiss. Hiccup gave in and pushed his hips a little harder against hers causing her to release a louder groan against his ravaging mouth when a sudden thump against the newly closed front door made him immediately jump from her and stand straight still away from bed. She leaped from the bed and quickly fixed on her jacket and

skirt, clearing on her throat as they both intended to keep their knees capable of resisting some sudden impacting standing after \_relaxing\_ so much.

Hiccup went past her, grabbed on his tunic and slid it on before walking toward the edge of his loft to get a glimpse of who might be responsible for such intrusion when he spotted a huge black boulder with wings and big green eyes staring right at him, sitting innocently by the door, tail resting around him.

Hiccup pouted at him and sighed exasperated before turning back to Astrid, grabbing his vest and sliding it on, "Definite \_no\_ into moving up here after marriage, Astrid."

She just laughed. Not at his words, but at the way his brows joined into an annoyed frown and his entire face turned a dark-bright red.

"It wouldn't be \_that\_ bad." She teased.

Hiccup glared back at her, "Astrid, this time, it was Toothless, what if next time it's my mom or Gobber?"

She just shrugged, "It had always been Toothless the one interrupting us."

Hiccup shifted his stare from a frown to one of disbelief, "What are you saying?"

She chuckled and walked to him, fixing his vest and hair. "What I'm saying, is that Toothless knows exactly when to interrupt us and thanks to him, we haven't been discovered by anyone else."

Hiccup rolled his eyes and then looked back down at her with curiosity as she caressed on his facial features, "You know, it's simply because it itches and scratches, when with the beard, I mean."

He rose a brow, then grinned, "Oh, wasn't it because you thought it doesn't suit me?"

"That too." She laughed shamelessly.

\* \* \*

><p>The gathering that evening started with an unbelievable silence from everyone except both chiefs and Gobber himself who wouldn't just bring himself to stop babbling about how much good it would do to both tribes to tie a friendly knot. Hiccup was more like focused on his steps through the room than into their conversation, Astrid walked by his other side and Eret was just a few steps back away from her.<p>

Ruffnut followed Eret, her brother by her side, Fishlegs on her other side and Snotlout picked on his nose as he walked in with his father, Spitelout, who just had to choose Valka to babble about how great of a chief he would have been if Hiccup wasn't of age for the leadership. She heard him, of course, but nothing assured no one that she was actually \_listening\_ to \_anything\_ he was saying. Her eyes were straight at Hiccup's backside, as if she were watching him from



afar just like how a caring and overprotective mother would do.

Gothi, the Elder, was already sitting by the chair positioned at their chief's right. Hiccup pulled the seat on his left for Astrid to sit. When she did, he then pulled the one at Astrid's left so his mother would stay nearby. Then, he took his place on the big chair between Gothi and Astrid. Gobber, sat by Gothi's right, Eret by Gobber, Ruffnut was by Snotlout, Spitelout was between Fishlegs and Tuffnut and at the far end of the large oval-shaped table, Osch and his son got quite comfortable.

All this time, Astrid hadn't realized her hand was well gripped by Hiccup's ever since he got seated. Of course, their joined hands rested on his lap under the table. When she finally felt his thumb rubbing on the back of her hand, she glanced down at them and saw how his now larger hand encased hers. She could also feel how lightly his fingers trembled against her skin, letting her know how nervous he might begin to feel at the moment. This wasn't their first gathering, but it was indeed their very first time with other tribes. Taking in a deep breath, letting it go silently but heavier than she actually planned it to be, then she held on his hand a little tighter. He looked back at her, eyes unsure. Clearly confirming the kind of discomfort he was making her believe with how he held her.

Her lips curled up into a sweet smile and as he slowly leaned to her, Osch exclaimed grasping onto his mead mug, "Straight to the point, now!"

The two lovers felt startled as they both pulled away from each other and soon Hiccup's hands met the table. Astrid's remained well settled on her lap, though.

"Right." Gobber said "It been a while since Berk ever found itself in a tight position. We mustn't take any chances in receiving attacks while we are still workin' on our forts."

"Especially now that we are tis' close to winter and its strong unstable weather." Spitelout added while rubbing on his beard.

"Technically, the clouds and recent research around the island's tallest peaks have confirmed that this year we might have several more blizzards than last year." Fishlegs said as he pointed his index finger up.

"Thanks, Fishlegs." Hiccup nodded once at him then looked over at everyone else, "We've reached beyond our goals of finishing the dwellings by winter. Thank Odin we only need to worry about the few ice peaks remaining in Berk before they get any thicker with the upcoming storms."

"That can be arranged." Fishlegs said "If we readjust most of our daily working schedules and focus mostly on the removal of the remaining ice peaks, we may as well be done before expected."

"Yeah, but then that would mean forgetting about all the other important stuff." Snotlout protested. "Like dragon care, for example."

Astrid frowned at him, "We can suspend all dragon training lessons and simply focus on what Fishlegs just said so we can get over it for once and all. I'm sure the dragons won't mind having a small break from training so much."

"Or from having us on their backs." Ruffnut blurted.

"Yeah! What she said." Tuffnut pointed with his thumb at his sister, then blinked in recognition and looked back at her, "Wait, what?"

Astrid just rolled her eyes and leaned back on her chair when Hiccup rose both his arms trying to wave them in a way everyone would understand he just wanted a peaceful gathering. "Guys, please, we can discuss this some other time."

"Aye, Hiccup is right." Gobber said, "Now, where were we?" He glanced at an abhorred Osch picking on the dirt within his long nails. "Ah, yes! Discussing the treaty between Berk and Hollibus."

At that moment, the door was opened and as the men went suddenly silent by the sight of a young boy running right towards Astrid and standing between her and Hiccup.

Breathless, the pale, black-haired, bright blue eyes and with an age of no less than seven springs, both of his tiny hands rested on Astrid's wrist over the chair's handle and gripped on her while trying to catch on his breath.

"What is it?" She asked. The boy looked frightened, for it had been his very first time coming up to one of the strongest warriors in all the northern hemisphere. His tiny chest rose and fell like a heartbeat as he pulled her hand in his direction.

"Please, come with me." The boy whispered.

Astrid rose a brow and glanced back at Hiccup who was as confused as she was. He then just nodded in approval and she stood on her heels, "Gentlemen, Ruffnut, Gothi, Valka" She individually nodded once at the women in respect "Please excuse me."

The boy took her to the far, dark back of the room as he gently let go of her hand and slid it within his tunic. Astrid kept on her confusing stare at the kid until she saw him pull out an envelope from the inner vest pockets and offered it to her. She took a hold of it and flipped it. There was no addressing other than Hiccup's name on the envelope's cover. Her brows furrowed as she slid her finger through the small, red enclosure and pulled out the scripture within.

Her eyes widened at the contents of the letter, nevertheless did her expression grew faintly tired afterwards. Then she decided to read it twice to deprive herself from believing otherwise.

Dear Hiccup, \_

Our most sincere apologies for not warning you sooner, but according to ancient laws and traditions we cannot afford into risking our people's safety and trust by compelling them to bond with the kind of beasts we are so used to give in our lives destroying their mere

existence. Heaviest feeling within my chest for not accepting a treaty between our two tribes and Berk. Best if we leave it as it is.

—

\_Clans Smorton & Feyvor. \_

Astrid just sighed aloud and leaned her head back, staring up at the distant ceiling, "Who said anything about risking other's safety?" She whispered, meaning for the boy to hear her but when she looked back down, the boy was already gone.

She tilted her head to the side, wondering when exactly the boy left so silently without her even noticing.

Decided to inform Hiccup right away, Astrid silently walked back to the table crowded of friends and leaders. While Gobber read the treaty in his hands, the young woman sneaked behind Hiccup and leaned over his shoulder, whispering the news into his ears.

Hiccup glanced back at her in disbelief but then his expression relaxed to one of sudden defeat. Astrid placed the telegram in his hands and sat back into her place, following his gaze for a while until Osch cleared his throat, brusquely interrupting Gobber. "Yeah, yeah. Same old, Gobber, same old. But now I have new conditions to add into the treaty statement."

They all stared at their visitor as he continued, "If I am to risk exposing myself and village to dragons, then I want something that will assure me such dragons \_won't\_ turn out to be a menace for my people."

"Eh, what would ye suggest, then Osch?" Gobber asked.

Osch simply grinned and began rubbing on his beard, "\_My\_ \_son\_. I offer my son's hand to a suitable berkian bride."

Hiccup just nodded, as did Gobber, "Fair enough. There are several befitting young ladies yeh could bring yer'self to meet for yer son."

Osch grinned, shaking slightly his head, "No, no. You see, my son has already \_chosen\_ his bride."

The twins shared their usual "huh?-glance "How can \_that\_ be possible if you just arrived?" Ruffnut asked,

Billus chuckled with utter pride, "I got lucky to see her at the docks."

"And who may we ask is this maiden you speak of?" Eret asked raising a brow at the hefty chief near him.

Osch dropped his hand from his beard and angled it just perfectly enough to point at the one sitting by the local chief, "\_Her\_."

"What?!" Astrid exclaimed once she realized \_who\_ he was pointing at.

The news made Snotlout spill on the mead he had been drinking,

Fishlegs lose a safe hold on the charcoal pencil he was holding on his hand, the twins shared a surprised stare at each other, and Eret opened his mouth to respond when Hiccup's voice thundered through the room, making everyone fall silentâ€”though he didn't really mean for his tone to sound so loudâ€”"That is out of the question, Osch. Forgive me, but no."

Osch leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest and shrugged, "Tis, either that or no treaty."

Hiccup stiffened at the threat.

"I hear the young lady here present is known as one of the best female warriors in all the northern side of the globe and I want that kind of strong alliance as well. You want protection, I do as well. Fair game, Hiccup!"

Hiccup leaned forward, both hands laced together and resting helplessly on the table. His eyes firm and threatened through the table and straight at Osch "I said no, Osch."

Something, somewhere through Astrid's veins, froze. She had never heard him release that kind of attitude before. He usually tried to find sociable alternatives to fix the issues but this time, this time his boldness was absolute and final. This way, he reminded her of his father.

"Give us one good reason why we cannot tie the knot with the fine warrior." Billus said.

Then everyone else began blurting out spontaneous answers, all at the same time.

"She's dangerously sick?" Fishlegs said,

"Crazy?" Snotlout said,

"Widowed?" Tuffnut said,

"Pregnant?" Ruffnut said.

"She's mine." Hiccup's answer was the one that pierced through the entire room and straight at the two visitors as he glared specifically at Billus. Soon, long, cold, and soft fingers ran over his shoulder and waves of calm immediately rushed within his body, just soon enough to realize his beloved had stood up from her seat once again and was standing right by his side.

Hiccup leaned back against the chair, placing a hand on hers over his shoulder and without taking his eyes off Billus, he finished his answer, "She is my wife."

"She married?!" Osch asked surprised.

"Uh, she is?" Tuffnut asked within mutters when Fishlegs pinched on the blonde male twin's kneecap.

Tuffnut groaned and then cleared his throat, "I mean, she is!" He confirmed, "Wait a minuteâ€”|" He glanced back at Eret, confused once again "Who are we talking of?"

Snotlout exhaled exasperated "Oh for the love of Thor! Couldn't you just choose someone \_else\_? Do you have \_any\_ idea on how far long have I tried to seduce her and she still chose a fishbone over a macho-man like me?!" he shook his head in shame, "Dude, you could do way better."

Astrid glared at all of them, screaming through her eyes for them to shut up for once. They all apparently got her message for they just leaned back and remained silent.

"You know, Hiccup. I don't believe you are married \_just\_ yet." Osch said, relaxed.

"Oh yeah?" Astrid grinned, "How can you be so sure about that?"

"Because \_I\_ asked some of your people whether this chief had finally wed a lady and if so, then \_who\_ was she."

Astrid stiffened at the sound of that. Muscles clenchedâ€"in every sense of the wordâ€"teeth found their way against her lips and sooner than ever, they began grounding on them like a fearsome beast planning on ravaging on her prey, palms closed into fists, knuckles aching. The bare desire of groping on her axe and throw it across the table to slit on the brute's throatâ€"for once and allâ€"was inevitable. She wanted to know what was the necessity of lolling on to marry her to a stranger when there were many other rightful women all around Berk that would surely be more than just grateful to marry a muscular and not-so-bad-looking man like Billus. They would probably be more than just happy to have them slit their womanhood open for life by him.

The thought of him being the one taking her womanhood, only made the little monsters awaken within her empty stomach, which only made her feel nauseous and grumpier than usual.

Before disrespectful words would escape her lips, matching with her suddenly riled frown and snarl, Gobber stepped into the tension between the visitors, Hiccup, and Astrid. "Erm, hold up a minute!"

As everyone suddenly glanced at the hefty blonde within their reunion, he sighed aloud. That was when Astrid noticed he had the telegram she had just handed Hiccup a while ago, in his hands.

How did it get to \_his\_ hands? Perhaps it was while she distracted herself in her own disappointment and denial of sharing an eternal bed with a complete stranger. Or was it when Hiccup claimed what was \_his\_? Still, the point that startled her the most was the fact that he now had the telegram in his hands even if she knew that sooner or later, Hiccup would have to inform him and his mother about what was truly going on.

"I understand your asking, Osch." Gobber continued "Astrid sure is one of our most valuable peaches, she strong, brave, fearless and enjoys competition more than anything. But we cannot compromise her this much."

Osch leaned back against his seat and crossed his arms over his chest

once again. Staring straightaway at Gobber, very much displeased "And why \_not\_?"

"Well, we very much need her here in Berk. She is second in command after the chief, boldly trusted by our late and beloved chief before Hiccup, Stoick the Vast. We cannot simply dishonor his desires in seeing his son marrying one of Berk's most valuable treasures by simply neglecting that longing from his. There sure \_must\_ be a best way to settle tis'."

"Wait, what if I told you a secret?" Ruffnut intruded.

Eret immediately sent her a sharp stare mixed up with apprehension for a slight thought and flashback of what this senseless woman had witnessed not long days ago back into the wilderness. He feared the secret would come to the fiery light, especially in front of so many people.

She ignored him enough to smirk at Billusâ€"and \_just\_ him.

"What secret?" Billus asked.

"What if I told you she wasn't suitable enough?" She pointed right at Astrid's direction.

"Explain yourself, woman!" Billus exclaimed already feeling exasperated.

"What if, Astrid Hofferson, wasn't a \_maiden\_ anymore?"

"What!?" Astrid blurted, her fist slamming against the table with such a force that nearly sent everyone chills throughout their veins "Ruffnut?!"

Ruffnut ignored her and rested her chin on her palm as her elbow grounded firmly against the wooden table, "What if I told you, that she has been sneaking around and turns out to be \_expecting\_?"

"Excuse me?!" Astrid hissedâ€|again. Her eyes burning fire as she was only seconds away into crawling on the table and beat the crap out of the other blonde in the room. No shame invaded her, no unease nor anxiety. It was the anger that caved within her soul and lingered throughout her bloodstreams. Disappointment and sudden rage fed from the little of a good judgment she had left in her.

"Ruffnut, show a little more of respect now will ya?" Eret growled.

The girl turned her head to the man halting her from keeping on speaking and seemingly annoyed by the way he spoke to her, she glowered before saying "Oh yeah? Like \_you\_ know what respect even means when you've been enjoying the wet and naked view of your trainer! What, aren't you having enough with the \_private\_ lessons?"

"Ruffnut!" Eret roared wide eyed.

"Astrid?!" Hiccup sprayed instantly glancing back up at her in astonishment. The warrior standing right by his side just stared down

at him. Sharing the same shocking glare, unreservedly speechless. Battling between the wonders of what was wiserâ€"to say somethingâ€"or what was dumbâ€"to stay silentâ€"either way, she just couldn't bring herself to speak when her throat felt as if it had been split in two. All she could bring herself to was to shrink her head into her shoulders at him.

Silence invaded them all. Ruffnut and Eret's vengeful stare was enough to make Tuffnut, Fishlegs and Snotlout look at them in shock. Valka, seemed worried as she rested her fine right hand on her lips and shifted her eyes from one head to the other. Gobber just remained silent with his eyes wide open, staring at an endless undefined spot in the room. Spitelout cleared his throat and crossed his arms over his chest, "I knew something was up between them two." He shook his head, speaking low enough not to sound disrespectful, but clear enough to be understood by everyone in the room, "Such a shameâ€|"

Shame. That word haunted Astrid's thoughts all of the sudden. Shameâ€| she could almost whisper them to herself, shame for what exactly? Though she knew she had some useless explaining to do, she was most likely focused on what exactly should she tell Hiccup. There was nothing to say, other than pointing out Ruffnut's shocking babble could just be a way to get Astrid out of an unwanted marriage. But stillâ€| the girl just made things worse for all of them.â€"especially for Hiccup and Astrid.

Billus and Osch shared a quick glance. Yet, perfect enough to confirm their individual thoughts in order to come into a conclusion. Then, before the rightful warrior would draw in a deep breath in order to fill her lungs with enough oxygen to speak, the larger Viking within them stood up from his seat in an abrupt movementâ€"Billus mimicked himâ€"and frowned at the chief, "I hardly believe all that is true. But I will give yeh three days to come up with a decision. I trust three days will be fair enough for me to investigate and see that all the jabber in this gathering had been bare lies and in three days, I expect to witness a wedding. If not, then consider the treaty denied."

Not fifty seconds had passed by and the room was nearly empty. Only Valka, Hiccup, Gobber and Astrid remained inside. Ruffnut was the last to walk out as in an unbelievable flash.

Astrid had disengaged the axe from her back laces, drew her arm back and with greater force than expected, the weapon smashed against the wooden door, pushing it closed right when Ruffnut had slid herself out of the building. "Shit, I missedâ€|" Astrid hissed. Clearly, she was aiming at Ruffnut's backbone. The word missed, was just new in her broad vocabulary of competition.

Her back straightened when she felt a suddenly warm hand grope on her shoulder. Her throat became dry and her eyes shifted uncontrollably over the wooden surroundings for a brief second before turning her head to the right, seeing Valka's concerned eyes skim through her. That was when Astrid noticed Hiccup standing not a few far feet away from his mother, but staring uncertain at his lifelong companion. She walked respectfully past Valka and slowly approached the boy. Searching for his darkened eyes, the thin green ring around them was a perfect indicator that he wasn't in a very good moodâ€"not to mention his slightly furrowed browsâ€"his lips turned out to be his

teeth \_number\_--\_one\_--\_victims\_ as his expression seemed rather hurtful and somehow disowned.

"Hiccup?" She whispered, her hand gently stretching out to find his own, ignoring all eyes on them for the moment.

He didn't meet her eyes. His eyelids blocked any chances to allow them meet gazes. He seemed to rather see nothing but darkness than to encounter her eyes for the moment. "You know, right now, I wonder whether it was true that you were simply being \_spied\_ \_on\_ or you just said that to give away any chances of people confirming the rumors around the island."

Her chest tightened, "Hiccup?" her voice wasn't loud enough for Gobber and Valka to hear, but Hiccup could. Even if it ended up sounding a little shaky. "Do you seriously believe in \_rumors\_?"

When her hand finally found his and her fingers brushed against his tightened knuckles, Hiccup sighed exasperated, jerked away from her and shook his head "I don't know anymore, Astrid. Everything is justâ€|so confusing."

"Still, will you believe in them over my words?"

Hiccup remained silent. His eyes finally met hers and was taken aback once he saw a small line well from her puncta and fill up to a small trail in her blue eyes. Her teeth were beginning to mistreat her lips and abruptly sucked on her inner cheeks in order to keep herself from allowing those tears to roll down her cheeks. She wasn't willing to tear, not in front of him, not in front of \_anyone\_ at allâ€|ever. She was much stronger than that. Yet, strength didn't overcome the kind of stiffness she felt caving in. All of her muscles had contracted in a very painful way especially those protecting her chest and gut. Fearing of what Hiccup would answer to her last question.

He just looked exhaustedly at her before giving in and dropping his shoulders, "I don't know, Astrid. Justâ€|" he glanced away then back at her through an exasperated sigh, "Be prepared."

Words said, Hiccup didn't even give her a chance to speak and begin explaining herself when he was already walking past her and out of the Great Hall. Gobber was the last in leaving after sending Astrid a shameful glance and then the door shut closed, the sudden exchange of air and temperature blew out most of the candles near the entrance as Astrid stayed staring at the now closed doors. Be prepared?

His words drifted in her head once again before she took in a loud deep breath and let it out slowly,

"Prepared, \_for\_ \_what\_?"

## 7. Consequences

\*\*It's 3:00am and I must go to college soon so I haven't Proofread yet. I will, later when I get back. Hope you like it :) Night Vikings... \*\*



\* \* \*

><p>"Ruffnut!" Eret shouted once he slammed the Throston's door open with an easy kick from his foot. Of course, he had to make sure she was all <em>alone</em> in her humble home and in order to get that wish granted, he had to keep his duties well concentrated in that specific area of the village so he could keep a meticulous eye at who came in and who went out that hut.

Tuffnut seemed to be somewhere with Fishlegs and once he saw the hefty parents abandon their home and walk themselves elsewhere, he thought it would just be then, or never.

At first, he didn't see anything or anyone in the house. Then, an off key "Up here handsome!" sprayed through his ears and snapped his attention straight at the staircase as he saw the suddenly flattered blonde descend from them.

Her lips were curled up in a charming smirk as she swayed closer to the hunk of her fantasies. "You searched for me, young prince?"

Looking as if coming from a dream, Ruffnut spread her arms at the steamed man before her and licked on her lips as if preparing them for anything that involved contact between them and someone's skin.

How far long has he yearned for the moment to have her cornered and just slit her throat off? Yet, as much as he knew how much he wanted to choke her until being left completely breathless, he also knew his family had taught him best, to be a gentleman especially with women no matter how irritated he felt like. So he just reduced his impulses to slowly backing up from her and simply speak, "Why on Odin's temple have you done that?"

"Uh, done what?" She then halted her approach and leaned back against the big pole right in the center of her home, then shrugged on her shoulders.

Eret simply stared seriously at her, making her then chuckle in realization, "Oooh, you mean that?" She then shrugged again, "Well, for once I think I helped someone."

Eret rose a brow, shaking his head as he wonders whether this girl truly had some sense in that head of hers, "You know, you helped help no one, Ruffnut. All you did was steam up the pot."

She shrugged, "You heard Hiccup at the feast the other day, he said they always found a way back to each other. So I don't think there would be trouble with that."

Eret couldn't believe what his ears were hearing. It felt as if poison began piercing though his right ear and then come out the other before trying to drip down straight to his lips.

Shaking his head side to side in denial, staring down at her with disgusted eyes, Eret muttered, "How cynical of you, Ruffnut." He sighed looking away, "You could just go with anything, but why did you touch that specific one?"

Ruffnut carelessly shrunk her head in her shoulders "I honestly doubt they would fall for it anyway. Astrid may be fearsome and desireable but she's also as clean as a cloud. Besides, what else would you want? It was the first thing that popped into my head!"

"And apparently \_the only\_ thing that has ever popped into that head of yours, I see."

Eret then chuckled and frowned at her, "Either way, that's none of our business, Ruffnut. What she does with Hiccup is \_theirs\_ and none of us have the right to intrude."

"So what? It's not like Hiccup would actually let her go. If he does, then it means their relationship has turned out to be as weak as a drowning worm."

"Even if he does or doesn't, \_nothing\_ would fix what you've done."

"Oh yeah, and why not?" She hissed, "What do you care anyway? This all started because of \_you\_! \_You're\_ the one who was spying on her and following her every step like a stranded sheep."

He slammed his hand on his face and sighed exasperatedly "That has nothing to do with it." Then he realized what she had just said and frowned, pointing accusingly at her, "But \_you\_ promised you wouldn't say a word."

Ruffnut grinned and leaned forward testily, "Oh, did I \_truly\_ promise that?"

Eret was taken aback by her words. He relaxed his shoulders and stared at an endless spot beyond her body as he remembered how she had threatened to keep silence only if he did as she said. Then, the muscular ex-dragon trapper just glanced back at her and with slightly given in eyes, said "It's too late now anyway, isn't it?"

Ruffnut chuckled and circled the man of her dreams, her eyes scanning through his entire anatomy, studying his every detail. "Depends, Astrid has a strong sense of judgment compared to Hiccup. Though, you're letting your totally \_obvious\_ feelings cloud yours."

Eret rose a brow, confused, "Do you have \_any\_ idea on what you are saying? Sounds as if you don't know anything about alliances and marriage of a sort." He turned to face her, biting on his lower lip as if he just wanted to grope on her neck and drown her unconscious. She was just so...\_clueless\_.

Sighing, his hand slowly reaching out to her and then before getting close enough to grab her arm, it fell to his side. "An arranged marriage to unite tribes, isn't as good nor as fun as it may sound like. These, are the kind of events no one gets away with so easily. Once you're claimed, you cannot shake it off unless the man in command allows it and no one has ever witnessed that happening before. It's...\_irrevocable,\_ especially if you're a woman." His eyeballs suddenly seemed rather broken instead of angry for a flashed second "Marrying someone you don't even know, is the worse curse, it's like having all your free will being snapped away in one brief second. I wouldn't dare wish for this to anyone, not even to my worst enemy."

With this, Eret shook his head in defeat and walked toward the exit, Ruffnut just watched him leave as for when his hand reached for the door ring, her voice was barely audible for him to understand, "And how would you know that?"

As his head slowly glanced over his shoulder, not really caring if his strong-manly attitude is chattered before her at the moment, Eret allowed his voice be released from his vocal chords in a very low whisper, "Because I've been there."

Sooner than Ruffnut could even think of saying something in response, the new guy in their Village had already walked out the door, closed it with unbelievable delicacy and vanished from the perimeter.

\* \* \*

><p>"What in Thor's hammer do yeh think yer doing, child?"<p>

"What I know most. Taking actions."

"Yer gone outta yer mind?! Rumors will be confirmed if yeh execute this kind of stupidity, Astrid."

"I don't care anymore. Seems like every one of you believe most in gossip than trust. I've had enough of that." Hands were already sore for working on her axe, training in the darkest dot within the woods to relieve herself from the rage caving in her soul after what had happened, no more than three hours ago at the Great Hall. She didn't even attend to dinner, after receiving an unexpected answer from her beloved, all she could do was torture endless trees until her arms were aching just enough to get numb and stop obeying her resistance commands. Now, even as she felt how her hands could barely even grab a firm hold of her clothes and toss them into the half-full leather bag well positioned on her bed; she was determined on pushing herself a little further caring much less about the consequences.

The decision had been made. She wasn't going to stick around with her arms tightly crossed and do absolutely nothing while everyone around her had suddenly turned their backs unreasonably at her. And here she thought her people were very much proud of her in every sense of the word. Yet, like everything in life, gossip seemed to take a win. Nevertheless, Astrid Hofferson wasn't willing to allow a tiny and insignificant word-spread ruin her perfectly overjoyed life. She had three days to make a decision, whether think about herself or her own village's safety.

But, for the moment, all she wanted was to take those three days she had of spare, as an opportunity to make up a plan in order to fall into a fair agreement with the Hollibusians. While it, she just couldn't stay within the warmth of her own home where her mother wouldn't get off her neck and push her into a cursed destiny every second she had as a chance to do so.

"And what exactly are yeh planning on doin'?" The heavy, tall woman with massive breasts and dark hair fixed into two perfectly braided buns on either side of her headâ€"covering her earsâ€" said as she rested her hands on her waist and blocked the entrance out of her daughter's room while watching her pack up. "Yeh know, problems

aren't meant to be resolved by fleeing." She frowned, displeased, "I taught ya better than that, Astrid. Why not simply talk the problem off and see if ya can convince Osch to relieve you from marriage with Billus?"

Astrid bobbed her head and shifted her weight on her left foot as she curled her brows into a tight frown, "Mother, Hiccup, is the one who does the reasoning part, I on the other hand, do the head-slicing and in order to avoid getting myself into any more trouble just because Hollibus' precious heir was suddenly found limbless in his room for getting in my way, and then have me executed for such, I very much rather just take some time for myself to think of something."

"And does leaving yer home ever qualifies as a good option?"

The girl sighed, lacing the strands of her bag and tying a tight knot before throwing the bag over her shoulder, "I don't know, mom. But if there is something I can do to fix this, then I don't want anyone to get in my way. Best if I just do it on my own."

On her way to the door, where her mother stood firm, blocking her exit, Astrid had to raise her chin up in order to meet her mother's eyes. The woman was probably as tall as Stoick the Vast had been. Which made it much more difficult for Astrid to get past by without facing the possibilities of ending up with a gross bruise on any part of her body if she ever upset this particular warrior.

Although she was prepared for basically anything, any kind of grotesque reaction from her mother for standing disrespectfully at her, all she could feel were her shoulders sinking under the burning touch of two big palms encasing them in and slightly gripping on her muscles. "Not that I do not wish for yer happiness. It is what a mother would desire most for her only daughter. But unfortunately, we are in critical position. Yeh know that very well, Astrid. It is time yeh think of yer family before anything else."

Her heart sunk. She didn't need a dictionary to discover the true meaning of her mother's statement. Yet, as she swallowed with light difficulty, Astrid took the risk of confirming what her ears had just heard from her mother as she asked "Are you saying, that you now disagree on my marriage with Stoick's son?"

The hands over her shoulder fell. Bertha's body leaned straight back and her dark eyes pierced down her daughter's shiny blue ones. "If it is for Berk's own benefit, I suggest yeh consider the proposal with young Billus."

Astrid frowned, and instead of talking back, all she did was step a little closer to her mother and tried to reach for the door handle. Big-boobied Bertha, didn't say a word. She thought what she had just spilled down her daughter's senses would be more than enough...for now.

So she moved aside, letting her only daughter open the door and walk past it in an unpleasing silence. Short minutes later, the house only carried one soul. One that could be divided by twenty for her massive size. Yet, her eyes on the now maiden-less bedroom seemed awfully tired.

To be quite honest, Bertha had never agreed to a union between her daughter and Stoick's boney son. She much rather see her marry a much more daring kind of man, like Snotlout or even a foreign stranger in order to make their family stand out. Happiness and individual care was not necessarily in her list of desires for her own offspring. To her, love was a weakness. A plague that must be terminated at once.

She had an arranged marriage as well and in time, she learned how to become a suitable wife until Odin finally decided to take her husband from their hold.

Moreover, Bertha was a faithful believer that convenience had always come first. That was when, for her, loving an ideal man was out of the question and the possibilities of building a respectful relationship between strangers, were simply slow in order to grab a hold. But she wouldn't allow Astrid to take those facts against her own mother and flee as freely as she wanted with the Haddock boy when she had the power of doing something that would benefit her land for once. Though, after hearing throughout the village on the Chief's sudden reaction to what kinds of rumors banged against Astrid's small back, Bertha was entirely convinced that she would have to soon pack on her daughter's possessions and ready her for a long voyage...with her new husband.

\* \* \*

><p>"As if... They're <em>all<em> crazy if they think I'd stay lip-sealed. They'll see. They'll all see who fearless Astrid Hofferson truly is." She muttered to herself as she banged closed the door behind her and headed straight upstairs to the first bedroom on her left.

But, what will they see? She had been talking to herself about things she hadn't even planned on taking action. All she could bring herself was to pack in what she needed the most and take Stromfly with her to what was meant to be hers and Hiccup's new home.

As she allowed the bag slip from her shoulders and bang against the floor, Astrid slowly walked within the still empty room and straight to the window, glancing out at the dark skies above, hands resting on the window frame. In all honesty, her head was so puzzled up, she could barely think of anything asides of the memories about that night's events. She still couldn't believe everything that happened back then, how nearly twenty years of dedication on her own freedom had come to a sudden end in just hours. Though, every thought in her head ended up on how her lover's eyes struck her heart and twisted her soul as tight as possible after seeing his reaction towards the issue and even his only, unexpected response.

Be prepared... He had said, but prepared exactly for what?

Was he going to take action as well? Or was he just warning her that things will be different from now on?

The only thing she knew, was that when you get a chance to prove yourself, you have to jump on it without a second thought. She just needed to find an actual chance to regain control. But, how was she going to do all that by herself?

By this time in the morning, Berk will surely turn on her. So how could she possibly find a way to get off these threads on her own? She had to think on something, and fast.

"Either way, I won't let you off that easily, Hiccup." She whispered into the skies, able to see a small glimpse of the Haddock home from her window thanks to the way their unfinished home was built up the hill, a little further from Hiccup's current house.

Taking in the evening's serenity, allowing its cold breeze fill in her heated up lungs, Astrid couldn't help but to keep on talking to the bright, tiny white dots on the dark sky above her. "I wouldn't dare betraying you... But, what can I do to prove it? To prove how wrong the village is to mark my forehead with shameful false statements?"

"By telling him, maybe?" Astrid gasped at the sudden sound of Valka's soft voice intrude the deep silence around her. As she turned around to face the mother of the man she would rip heads and bones apart for, without a single thought. Valka's lips curled into a warm smile as she approached the girl and slowly rose a hand to her cheek. She was hesitant, but in the end, her warm hand caressed on Astrid's pale, cold facial features.

"What...how did you know I was here?"

"I didn't know." Valka simply responded "I came to bring in some chairs for the dining table. I heard something from up here and found you."

Astrid just blinked. Not really knowing what to say about that. She knew the house missed some furniture. There was no bed, no dressers...they only had kitchen tools and the dining table. The rest was just so embarrassingly empty.

Apparently, now they had new chairs thanks to Valka. Yet, it wasn't because they couldn't purchase any. Hiccup had previously mentioned he wanted to customize his own house as much as he could. So he would be willing to be the one making their bed and whatnot for when they get married. It was just that with everything going on in the village, things weren't really going as planned for the renovation of their new home. But, she never complained about it. Astrid believed it was rather nice of him wanting to create all the things they'd find useful for when the time to live under the same roof and have a family would come. So she just showed patience over it and offered her help on as much as she could.

"You know, Astrid, not having a single candlelit in such a dark place could turn out to be quite dangerous."

The girl deviously grimaced, "I don't know if you're aware, Valka, but I fear of nothing in this world. A little bit of darkness won't eat me up."

Valka slightly laughed and retreated her hand from Astrid's cheeks. "I figured you'd say that."

Then all of the sudden, Astrid tilted her head to the side in slight confusion, "Why did you bring those chairs?"

The woman chuckled, "Hiccup finished them and asked me to bring them."

Astrid rose a brow, then realized something...

\_If Hiccup asked Valka to bring the newly finished seats, then that means he's not that mad at me.\_

That was when her eyes snapped wide open and her feet suddenly dragged her down the stairs until she reached the dinning side of the cabin. The well-polished, large, rectangle table had been well placed in the center of the room, by the fireplace. The table was large enough for six heavy Vikings. When she approached the first chair, she could hardly see through the darkness and that was when the fire pit had been suddenly lit. As she glanced at the fire, she noticed Valka now dusting some old wood dust from her hands and smiling back at Astrid.

Every chair had a different story to tell. They were made from the finest and strongest wood in all of Berk's forest. As her hand slowly ran through the material, she noticed how on the vase shaped splat, there was the shape of a Night Fury's face engraved in. The top rail had the shape of a wavy ocean. The second chair, had the face of a Deadly Nadder carefully engraved on the vase shaped splat. The third, had two crossed axes, the fourth, had a flaming sword upon what seemed like Toothless's prosthetic tail. The last two chairs, however, didn't have anything specific engraved in their vase shaped splats. They just looked soothingly \_perfect\_.

Astrid smiled, not really helping to admire such priceless beauty. So she shifted the chairs and placed the one with the Night Fury on one corner and the one with the Deadly Nadder on the other. To make them as if it was to be their own specific place to dine. Sitting on the opposite side of the other.

Valka just smiled as she watched, then, she took a seat on one of the newly made chairs and looked back up at Astrid "I take it you like them, don't you?"

Astrid nodded, "They're stunning." Then, she looked back up at the woman not so far from her, "But, I don't understand...I thought he'd be mad at me."

Valka chuckled and stood back up from her seat, "Which is why I encourage you to find him first thing tomorrow and confront him. Behave like a suitable wife and a comprehensible lifelong companion."

As Astrid's gaze dropped to the ground, it didn't take long until she felt how her facial skin was once again encased in this strange woman's hands, "Give yourselves the night to think through things correctly, then speak with him. I know you're stronger than you look and you can take this in and \_much\_ \_more\_. But remember, Astrid...before me, before anyone else, before his own father, Hiccup only had \_you\_. Do you really think he would throw all that down the cliff just because of some unproven babbling?" She chuckled and rubbed her thumb against her jawline, "I trust you know much better than that."

Astrid's eyes finally found Valka's "Are you saying, that you

\_believe\_ \_me\_?"

Valka nodded, "Yes, I do. And if anything, I would gladly glue my son's butt to a chair with dragon saliva in order to have him listen to you."

Astrid laughed, not really helping it. Then, her eyes went warm once again, "Thanks...but, why?"

Valka took in a deep breath and gently slid her hand down from Astrid's cheeks and reached for her hand. "In our world, women scarcely have any right to fight for their own desires. For centuries, we've done what our husbands believe would be best for us. And in wasteful sighs we remain silent under the shadows of those with whom we disagree. Some, were just born different. Stoick, might have never wanted to listen to my opinion about gaining peace with dragons, but he always found time to squeeze in the opportunities of listening to any issue or worry I had. I've noticed, in the little time I've been here, forming part of this new Berk, I have gone to the conclusion that my son, is no different from his father. I've \_seen\_ how you two sit apart from the others and talk as if no one else was around. How he watches and listens to you, it all just explains how comprehensive he is."

Astrid couldn't help but to nostalgically smile, "That, he \_is\_."

If for any reason, Astrid had \_changed\_ from being terribly violent to a little less of such throughout the years, was simply thanks to Hiccup who served as her tiny box of secrets and vice versa. Before him, she couldn't trust anyone and always drowned in her own troubles. Making her own moods usually scary. Now, she could be less frightening and more cheerful, but considering how things were starting to point out at her, being charismatic for a while longer wasn't exactly an option anymore. All she wanted, for the moment, was to pull someone's tongue out and slit it apart from their throats, then feed it to the dragons.

In just any other day, with any other woman, Astrid would show off an impossibly careless attitude, especially if we were talking about her own future and what benefited her village the most. But, this wasn't the case. This woman before her, offering her confidence wasn't just \_any\_ other woman. She was \_Hiccup's\_ mother. And even though it did cost Astrid some time to think through the reasons why Hiccup would spend much more time with his mother than with her as how he used to, it only had to take her one day... \_One\_ \_day\_ with this woman in order to truly understand how special she had become in Hiccup's life, and \_why\_. They were so alike. Probably \_that\_ could also be a way to confirm why the two women have come to peaceful terms in less time than expected.

"Well, I expect to see you tomorrow at the Academy?"

Astrid just nodded in response as she felt Valka release her hand and with a motherly warm smile, walked out the cabin in a peaceful silence.

No more than ten seconds after Valka left and Astrid was about to climb on the first step when the front door cracked open once again and Astrid's head snapped right at it. She gripped tightly onto the railings, when suddenly chills streamed down her heavy soul at the



sight of her dearest dragon's head peaking inside and then stomping carefully in, as if she had intended to be excessively careful not to break whatever was in her way—which was actually nothing since the house was completely empty asides from the dinning table and chairs.

"Hey girl, what made you come in?" Her arms stretched out to meet her dragon scales and gently rubbed on them. Stormfly purred pleased and pushed her peak affectively against her rider's chest, who then wrapped both arms around her head and brought her into a tighter embrace. "You wanted to spend the night with me, didn't you, huh? Afraid I might get cold?"

Stormfly just kept purring, enjoying how Astrid cuddled her in and questioned the obvious. Laughing, Astrid pulled back from her embrace and began carefully walking upstairs. Allowing the dim light from the fireplace to guide her every step.

Stormfly followed. The cabin was indeed, spacious enough for Stormfly to wander in it without any trouble. It had been Hiccup's idea to build in a house suitable not just for them two, but also for Stormfly and Toothless to have their own free space within whenever they wanted to stay inside. Not to mention, the large hut built right next to the house meant to be the dragon's official new nest.

It had all been Hiccup's idea and the dedication he had put to it...was indescribable and unbelievably priceless. Countless times Astrid had suggested to buy some furniture from Trader Johan, but no. He'd insist on having nearly every detail unique for their lives.

At times, she would tease him for growing clueless if he kept on so stubborn about managing the entire village and on top of that, finding some time to make new furniture for their home. Yet, within the silence of her usually overconfident personality, Astrid thought of this fact as a sweet detail from his part. Moreover, she wouldn't show it through words, but she usually did through actions by helping him as much as she could back at the forge.

Although having new furniture in the house seemed like a great possibility that Hiccup wasn't mad at her, it could also be classified as a way to get rid of the stuff making the blacksmith shop look smaller. Not exactly to be a positive option to think of...

As she pulled out the light brown fur blanket she had packed in from her bag, Stormfly circled over the center of the master chamber and laid as comfortable as she could, staring up at Astrid, with a wing widely spread, and offering her warmth.

Astrid smiled, "Thank you, girl." Were her only words before crawling under Stormfly's wing and drape the blanket over herself, using her own arm as a pillow and her back comfortably against the dragon's sides. Able to feel the deep heartbeats of her dragon, allowing them to rock her thoughts into a restless sleep as she whispered to herself "Tomorrow... Tomorrow, things will be different."

\* \* \*

><p>"<em>Where<em> is that son of a rat!?" Astrid stormed into the arena, holding a tight grip on her axe as she glared at everybody in

the academy.

"Oh, you're talking about Ruffnut, right?" Excitement dripped excessively from Tuffnut's words at the thought of his sister being violently smashed by the Hofferson rider.

"Um, she's not in, Astrid." Fishleg's gagged.

"Even if she was, it's not like we will tell you where my princess is." Snotlout proudly said while dusting his nails until his neck suddenly snapped against the solid stone behind him, being trapped between such and Astrid's axe.

He swallowed hard, Astrid just hissed while slowly adding some more pressure to his neck, "Where. Is. He?"

"I-I-I am not telling...!" Snotlout then blinked in realization "Wait, what? He, you say?"

"So! What is cooking for today's lesson?" Eret excitedly asked while fixing on his vest, walking down the entrance when he halted his movements in a reflexive reaction once he realized an axe had been thrown to land exactly between his legs.

"Oh, him you say..." Snotlout muttered as he watched an angry teacher close her palms into tight fists and slowly walk toward the now terrified new rider.

"She's really steamed up about all that happened last night." Fishlegs informed.

"Ha, too bad she's wasting her time. Being a woman is a disgrace when it comes to an arranged marriage. I mean, you cannot simply just get off of it especially if you've gotten involved in an endless stream of shame thanks to a juicy village rumor, haha, right Astr-"

Snap! A sword thrown with unexpected force flashed over Tuffnut's head and crushed right into the barrel behind him.

"Woah, let's just calm down." Eret gulped as he slowly backed up until he was completely cornered between Astrid and one of the closed doors to the supply rooms. "I'm sure there is a way out of this."

Astrid had picked her axe back up in her hand and this time she was aiming straight at Eret's throat, "Oh yeah? Then tell me, Eret, son of Eret\_. How will we crawl out of this hole, huh?!"

"Wait...no...but...I..." Eret gagged, but Astrid wasn't really planning on letting him speak just yet,

"Is it true what they said?! You dared to spy on me?!"

"No...what...no...Astrid...you got to hear me...wait..."

"Stormfly was chasing after you, wasn't she?!"

"Well...yeah...but..."

"And you didn't have the decency of telling me?!"

"H-H-How could I?!"

"By talking, maybe?"

"Bu-bu-but you wouldn't listen, nor believe me now, would you?"

"Depends. Were you planning on waiting so long or just do it before this could happen?"

"What in the world is going on here?" Billus asked while raising a confused brow as he made his way into the arena. Hiccup was silently walking along.

Toothless, was just a few steps behind Hiccup. He brought himself into an unexpected halt as soon as he caught sight of Stormfly laying comfortably by the fish barrels, her head at Astrid and Eret's discussion, watching pleasantly how her rider poured down all the anger within her.

Now the black dragon hurried toward her and greeted her with an excited growl. Stormfly brought her entire attention to her new Alpha—"and clearly her favorite companion" as well as Toothless cuddled closer.

"Oh, well look whose here." Snotlout grinned, crossing his arms over his chest, "Welcome to the party."

"What are you doing here?" Astrid hissed, pulling her attention away from Eret and gripping a lot harder on her axe's handle as she straightened her spine and glared at the new intruder of her life.

"I brought him in." Hiccup responded.

"And why is that?" Astrid growled, not really meaning to sound bitchy at Hiccup, since she was just directing every action and word at the new stranger.

"As visitor, I have a right to know what kind of relationship there is between a human and a dragon." Billus replied.

At the sound of that, Astrid made a quick glance at Stormfly who was silently watching her alongside Toothless and soon saw a quick flick from Astrid's fingers, immediately twisting her tail in response and snapping spine shots on a perfect line right at Billus's side. "I hope that answers your questions."

Billus skipped a step backwards in reaction to the spine shot stuck right by his foot. "What...what kind of woman are you?" He gagged, resting a trembling and unsure finger on her chest, as if that would stop her from getting any closer.

Astrid slapped his hand off of her and pushed the tip of her axe against his throat "The kind that would leave you limbless if you dare lay a finger on, ever again."

"Um, look, my dearest lady Iâ€"

"Save it." Astrid interrupted Billus, pressing the tip of her axe a little tighter against his skin. A small drip of red beginning to have contact with the well-polished metal "I don't want to hear your stupid voice. You wanted to marry me? Then allow me to warn you beforehand that you will not marry Snorta, nor Freya for I won't be devoted prudently to you and I will certainly rip my fertile insides out so I could never give you a child."

"Alright, that's enough, Astrid." Hiccup intruded, as calm as ever, placing a hand on hers, pushing down her axe as slow as he could while his other hand rested on her sides, as if he could somehow ease her rage with his gentle touch. "I um... I am pretty sure he got the message. Just, try to calm down."

"As if that'd be an option." Fishlegs said, "I haven't seen Astrid release her extremely violent temper in years."

"Yeah, I was beginning to miss that Astrid." Tuffnut said.

"And I was hoping we wouldn't get some of it for a few more years." Hiccup added while gently taking the axe off her hand. She let him, though. But only because he had been looking deeply into her eyes all the while.

"Probably because she has a new reason to go back to her creepy old self now." Tuffnut said.

"Yeah, what kind of woman would want to spread her legs unwillingly to a man? I wouldn't blame her for being angry with all this." Ruffnut added as she walked into the arena, alongside Valka.

"Like you had anything valuable to say. You're the main reason why she's all fired up!" Snotlout frowned.

"Uh, no I'm not. I just told the truth. Asides from her being pregnant, which I totally made up."

"Still, I think I would much rather be with child at this moment. Anything to relieve myself from the arms of an animal." Astrid sneered.

"But, you are not with child, Astrid." Hiccup sweetly said trying to make his low, soothing voice enough to calm her harsh breathings that made it clear to everyone around them how worked up she was.

"And how are you so sure, Hiccup?" Snotlout asked.

"I don't have to be. I trust her." Finally, his eyes skipped Astrid's but only to glare at Snotlout, "Seriously guys, I'm trying not to make things worse so could you just limit your arguments from a minimum to none?"

Snotlout just rolled his eyes and glanced away with arms well crossed over his chest once again.

Hiccup then glanced back at her and once he had her axe in his hand,

he gently gripped on her waist and moved her away from Billus, making her slowly mimic his movements. "Walk with me?" He whispered, trying as much as he could to calm her down.

Astrid was still having a hard time catching her breath and controlling the twitching of her fingers. Just a few hours ago, she had been sleeping under the warmth of her dragon's scales, after having a slightly soothing talk with who was pretty much meant to be her mother-in-law and now, she was about to slit open a man's throat. And not just any man's throat, a visitor. The heir from another village, meaning to make a peaceful treaty with her own. Just like she had previously warned her mother, Astrid wasn't born to do the rational talking. Yet, something she had forgotten right there, was that whenever Hiccup was to lose himself, she was always there to bring him back into a rational conclusion. But, now that she had lost herself within her anger, how in the world would she find a way back to serenity?

Apparently, Hiccup seemed to have a plan to that. He had rested his free hand on the small of her back, signaled their dragons to follow them with a wave from the hand holding her axe and walked her out of the arena before glancing back at his mother and Fishlegs near the entrance, "You two take over for today."

Both, Fishlegs and Valka nodded. Nevertheless, did they all watch how the four creatures silently exited the Academy. Leaving a huge question mark over each and every one of their confused heads.

Instead of feeling rather thankful for being stopped from killing someone that morning, Astrid couldn't help but to feel her cheeks redden and her eyes grow darken in shame. The picture of her leaving a threat back there at the arena all raw and simply hanging, wasn't at all pleasing for her. "Why did you stop me?"

"Well, I couldn't just let you murder our visitor now, could I?" Hiccup answered, his lips slowly forming a mischievous grin at her.

Astrid didn't really look at him just yet. Her eyes were sharp at her every step, "It would be a lot easier to get away with our problems."

"And, that would also mean another war between tribes?" Hiccup chuckled, "Astrid, we've had enough with what we've got right now. You know that better than anyone."

Astrid couldn't help but to growl at herself. She brought both hands to her face and groped violently on herself, as if trying to force herself to think straight for once.

Hiccup curled his bottom lip into his teeth and bit on it gently as he watched her battle with herself. "Hey...Astrid?" His hand suddenly took a gentle hold of her arm and tried to pull her hands from her face, just to make her stop her senseless actions. But on the other hand, he just wanted to have her calmed down for once. "Hey...um...you know I'm not that serious. Don't torture yourself over it."

"You don't get it, do you?" She growled, finally dropping her hands

off her face and glancing back up at him. For once, in many years, Astrid's eyes didn't look strong, willing, courageous, nor determined. They seemed... drained. Completely unlike her.

"That's the whole point. If I kill him beforehand, a war can be easily declared. If I kill him afterwards, I would probably be executed. Either way, a war between both tribes would be declared. But, I just couldn't help myself, Hiccup. At times, I would very much rather be a Screaming Death than a fearsome warrior."

"And because you're a fearsome warrior, you shouldn't let all of this crawl into your normal senses. You're acting like how Snotlout would, or even \_your mom\_."

"Oh yeah? And what exactly would \_you\_ suggest?" She frowned.

Hiccup sighed, "First, calm down, Astrid. We'll figure something out...\_together\_."

Taken aback by his serenity, how his mood had changed from last night's to the present, had only given birth to more doubts in her head. Yet, before she could ask him furthermore questions, Hiccup took in her forearm and dragged her with him further into the roads, their steps hurrying by the minute. That was when she realized, that the doors from the houses around them began opening, windows snapping open, women coming out from their homes with baskets full of dripping-wet clothes in their hold, on their way to tend some laundry, cultivate some cabbage and whatnot. Men holding their single axes and hammers, fishnets and bait, heading their way to their daily duties.

By the time she had snapped back into reality once again, she noticed they were practically running into the woods.

\_Running?\_

\_Why...are we trying to hide from everyone else?

><em>

>"Hiccup?"<p>

He didn't answer. He kept focused on their path straight into the forest's intimacy as they ran, their dragons following them.

\_Why would we run, when we have our dragons right behind us? What is wrong with him now?

><em>

>Then, their rush came to an end when the shadows from the trees vanished and revealed a stunning brightness. Her eyes glared at the sudden sunlight and when she could finally regain control on what she could and couldn't see, her hand fell from his hold and her feet ghostly brought her closer to the ends of the grounds beneath her before she could kneel and start carefully climbing down the moldy rocks, trying to steady her trembling feet on the unstable grounded surface.<p>

"You know, you could have \_asked\_ Stormfly for help." Hiccup teased, already on the cove's grounds, well seated on Toothless's back. "I'll laugh if you slip and fall. \_Merciless\_."

"I know. I just..." She took in a breath as she measured the height

left for her to reach the bottom and as she determined it could be a safe fall, she let go of her hold from the rocks and jumped down, growling within herself as she banged her feet strongly against the ground, stood back straight and dusted her hands together, "...not in the mood for asking anything today."

"Hm, reasonable conclusion." Hiccup sarcastically added. Astrid just rolled her eyes and led herself near the edges of the stream, sitting with her back against a boulder and her legs crossed one over the other.

Hiccup climbed off his dragon, gestured for him and Stormfly to go and have some fun and then followed Astrid, sitting right beside her. Pushing the axe away from them.

Toothless raised his head in surprise, showing his gums as he turned to Stormfly and began shrinking and bobbing their heads, playfully at each other before starting to run around like two kids after having a high dose of sugar in their tiny systems.

"Are we hiding from everyone else, Hiccup?" She didn't dare look at him. She just stared at an undefined faraway point.

"I guess so. Thought it would be best to avoid any possibilities of having you get even angrier."

"I did what I felt like doing."

"As always." He muttered.

She frowned, glancing back at him, "I won't stay with arms crossed."

"I know, but that doesn't mean we'll do things the reckless way. We have to think about something first."

"Hiccup. We have three days. Well, two if today counts as day one. What could possibly work out if Berk's safety hangs in the balance?"

"We will think of something." He repeated. His hand gently rested on her arm, lips sealed in a sweet yet weak smile, and his eyes focused only in her. "Remember when I asked you to be prepared?" She faintly nodded, "Well, I need you to be ready for whatever it is to come. Whether or not our plans might work, I need you to maintain your temper at the lowest. Just as how it has been for the past few years."

Hiccup's hand slowly traveled up her arm, to her right shoulder and finally ended on the sides of her neck, rubbing his thumb against the thin line defining her face from her neck. "I won't let anyone else have you, Astrid. That I promise you."

Her eyes blinked in surprise at the words suddenly spread from his lips, she had sworn his previous reactionsâ€"last nightâ€"were completely opposite from what he was showing off now.

Last night, he seemed so angry, confused and simply disappointed. Now, it was all the way around. His tone of voice was low and sweet, his touch was gentle, his eyes seemed as delicate as they've always

been and his determination into fulfilling his own goals dripped from his lips as he spoke on how he wouldn't just simply let her go.

"I...I'm...confused, Hiccup. Last night..."

"Last night," he interrupted, "I was shocked. I didn't know what to think, how to react, what to say. I wanted some alone time and apparently that made me realize how mean I was to turn my back at you at a moment like this. How you wouldn't do that to me even if I truly deserved it. But, by the time I came to that, I didn't see you again. After dinner, I went to your house, asked for you." His expression suddenly switched to slightly shameful as he pulled his hand from her and scratched the back of his head, trying to find the most suitable words, "I...um...well...your mom answered the door and...well...um...let's just say she didn't agree with a late visit from her daughter's lover."

Astrid's brows curled into a slight frown, "\_What\_ happened?"

Hiccup chuckled, shifted his eyes elsewhere, as he usually did whenever he was about to explain something shameful. "She started complaining on how inappropriate it was of me to knock on someone else's door at that time of the night. Then, I just asked for you." His eyes finally met hers once again, looking rather worried for a second, as he revived those last few memories in the back of his head...

"My daughter left. Took most of her belongings and fled home, no thanks to yeh risking her presence. Yeh should have kept her away from the docks in the first place, Ya fool!"\_

"But, why would she do that?!" Hiccup helplessly asked.

"Yeh tell me! Astrid's been taking senseless actions no thanks to yer doing!"\_

"What...my doing? Bertha, with all thou respect, I have nothing to do with what's going on and neither does Astrid. It's something that just happened and suddenly got out of hand."

"And why do yeh think it got outta hand, eh Hiccup?" She growled.

"What?"

"It got outta hand for yeh not thinking on what could go wrong if exposed to a foreign visitor. Astrid is no fool and she is far from repulsive so she would become an easy target. Everyone knows that, Hiccup. If her father were still alive, he would have locked her indoors until the visitors had left, and so would I have if I ever knew yeh'd be so careless!"

\_Hiccup had to bite on his lips, as hard as he could just to keep himself from saying anything disrespectful to the woman known best as Big-boobied Bertha. A fearless mistress with a body large enough to take down ten men with one simple hit. He wouldn't dare take a chance standing against his bride's mother, though now he would remind himself much more frequently from whom did Astrid get all those unique attributes.\_



\_"Any idea on where she could have gone to?" He asked.\_

"Not one. But even if I had, I wouldn't spill it for yeh. Now that things have gone through a different course, I must suggest you stop trying so hard and give in. Billus seems like a worthy opponent."

Hiccup nearly sneered, "Are you suggesting I let her marry Osch's son?"

\_"What I suggest, is for you to see Berk as a priority now that plans have gone into a tight twist. If yer so decided into finding my daughter, then I suggest yeh do so before she does something we would all regret. And when yeh do, make her complete the treaty. Think like a chief, Hiccup."\_ With that, Bertha took a step backwards and slammed the door shut on Hiccup's face. Then the flashback haunting his thoughts ceased to a final end.

"After that, I went back home. Toothless was well asleep so I couldn't ask him to track you down or even try to find Stormfly. So I just gave in for the night, hoping to catch a glimpse of you the next day, only to prove to myself you weren't completely gone. A while later, my mom came in and told me you were staying at our house. I wanted to go and confirm such but she didn't let me leave. She asked me to give it a night and just let us rest it off."

"She basically said the same to me." Astrid mumbled, remembering how Valka had asked her to give it a rest and then find ways to logically fix things on the next day. Yet, Astrid's previous actions were basically far from logical.

"How'd you sleep up there? There's no bed." Hiccup asked, raising a suddenly curious brow.

"Stormfly cuddled me in."

"And the lights?"

"Valka lit the fire when she came in."

"Ah, "

Astrid then grinned, taking a good hold of his hand and lacing their fingers together, "I liked the seats. They're beautiful, Hiccup."

He proudly smirked, "Told you it would be worth the wait."

"Yeah, and did it ever occurred you to start off with a bed instead?" She mocked.

He cleared on his throat guiltily, "Yeah, well, that came in after I had finished the chairs."

Astrid slightly laughed, "And you said I was the one making senseless decisions all of the sudden."

Hiccup nodded. Confirming her statement as he watched her roll her eyes and then lay her head on his shoulder. He snaked his other arm around her, bringing her closer to him, encasing her into a tight,

warm embrace as he buried his chin in her hair.

It always seemed like Astrid was the one comforting him, rhetorically asking him what could be the best choice, serving as his most peaceful and reasonable conscience.

Whenever he needed comfort, she was there. Whenever he needed someone he could trust his innermost worries and expect a Norse response, she had willing ears to give and always had something to say that would make him feel better. She was always there...no matter what his mood was, he had grown to enjoy having her join him and Toothless to search for new lands and map the world...together.

This time, was no difference. Even if she was the one who usually comforted him, Hiccup knew, that no matter how strong and brave Astrid might make herself even in the toughest times of her life, he knew she was still a human being. A woman whose feelings she might work as hard as she could to keep hidden, but would every once in a while slip from the already full mug.

Like now, he understood how lost she could feel deep within even if she barely showed it. And no doubt, was he willing to be her comfort. Just as how he had gained her absolute trust, how he earned the privilege to be the only one in this realm that would see her for who she is, without masks, without having to pretend being so strong. With each other, they could be just...humans.

So he could understand her senseless behavior back at the arena, how stupid it might sound the fact that she had left home just to have some time for herself, how she nearly killed two men in less than twenty minutes down in the arena...everything. He understood it. He understood her.

Hiccup knew all of her actions, were just product of her inner conscious being scared. Scared of throwing everything she had worked for her entire life, down the drain and devote herself to a man she had recently met. And even if she never admitted how she truly felt, Hiccup did know, because he knew her more than anyone else. He knew, that if it wasn't this Astrid drowned in his embrace, all exhausted and regretful of many mistakes of her life in just a second, then it would be that Astrid, back at the arena, torturing and destroying everything around her. So, he was glad to have found her before anything else could go awfully wrong, simply, because he would very much rather be the one who serves as comfort to her when she needed him the most, than to see her pay for the consequences of her own senseless actions thanks to her wrath.

He then wondered, at a time like this...what would his dad do?

—

"What are we going to do?" She asked, within whispers, still resting her head against the center of his chest, her eyes lost in sight through the cove.

"I don't know." He honestly answered. "Just, give me time. I'll figure something out."

She hesitated, then silently sighed, "Okay. But...don't take too long\_."

\_I know, Astrid. I know I can't wait too long, or else I'd lose you to an unworthy opponent and all for keeping my arms crossed. Now, just give me time to think about something...anything, just to keep you near. I wouldn't bare losing you right after losing my dad. Now I have to show you what I can do in so little time, without the need of your usual positivity. Though...some of that cheer you always spring to me could be gladly appreciated.\_

\_Then I realized, I still had some questions for her, some things I needed to clear in my head\_ \_before taking any kind of action, "Hey, Astrid?"\_

"Hm?" \_She sounded tired. As if she was halfway to fall asleep before I would intrude her relaxing session within my embrace. Her hand gripped on my waist and then loosened as her fingers relaxed and her breath banged against the thin layers of my tunic.\_

\_My fingertips slowly began slowly running through the knots of her tangled, messy braid. The tips were slightly damp, so was her neck and forehead. Probably from running down a river of Astrid-rage and try to commit murder under impulsive reactions.\_ "Are you angry, at Ruffnut, for saying what she did last night?"

"No, not her."

"Why not?" \_I tilted my head, trying to find her face, but it was hopeless, for her forehead was already buried against my neck, giving me a great chance to feel the cold of her sweat stick against my skin.\_

"Even though she said things that should cost her, her tongue, I can't simply be mad at her. If I was, then I'd spend the rest of my life upset with either of the twins."

\_I smiled, not really helping to realize my Astrid was finally going back to her usual senses.

><em>

>"So, you won't kill her?"<p>

"Why should I? Ruffnut and Tuffnut suffer from some kind of abnormalcy from birth. Best thing we have ever done is ignore them when we have to." \_At last, she rose her head to meet my eyes, her lips were curled up into a weak smile, \_"I did get mad at the fact Eret didn't have the courage to confront me and tell me the truth to my face, on top of feeling as if all my future plans were crumbling down in a second."

\_And that was why she had overreacted... Now I see the reasons behind her impulsive reactions a while ago. It was as if the old Astrid had somehow come back to life, all dark and with billions of secrets to hide. Unlike this Astrid, who brightened every ray of my days with her smile. Now I know why I haven't seen her so loosened up lately, was she scared? Astrid Hofferson? Scared of what? Of all this?\_

\_In a completely different time, asides from this one, I knew she would tell me the other part of her sudden deep burden. Now I couldn't just dare to pressure her. I never did. I've always showed myself patient enough to wait for until she was ready to open up from her stoned cage. As for when she finally does, I will be ready.\_

\_As I nodded my head back and forth in agreement, I buried my lips in her head and planted a strong, long kiss against her damp forehead, having her messy bangs curl in my lips and stick to them even when I pulled back, having to raise a hand and get them out with my fingers.\_ "Let's go back. Before anyone notices we're gone."

\_She chuckled\_, "I think they've already noticed their chief has gone missing with me, as per usual."

\_I smirked, cuddling her closer\_, "But, it's been a while since we last granted ourselves a small runoff."

\_She then nodded, as if her eyes had suddenly gone through a phase of nostalgia, before pulling away from my embrace, and pushing herself back on her feet. She stretched out her hand for me and I took it, being pulled in no time by her back up to my feet as I felt and watched her hand dust my shoulders and sides.\_

"You know, I thought you were mad at me."

\_I picked her axe from the ground and buckled it back on the pouch of her back holds.\_ "At you? Why would I be mad at you?"

\_She shrugged, while giving her back to me as I tried to lace her axe securely on her back. I still couldn't understand very well how this weapon never bothered her walking or running. She wore it as if it weighted nothing at all.

><em>

>"Your reactions. Last night?"<p>

"Yeah, that's all in the past, Astrid. I was shaken up. You know that. Don't worry about it."

\_She sighed\_, "You're right, just, don't do it again or I will have to break your spleen for scaring the dragons out of me."

\_Even though she had sighed, her voice sounded more like a mocking, quick laugh. So I leaned closer to her, then chuckled and took a hold of both of her arms, turning her to face me and as I playfully pouted, I leaned a little closer and faked a frown,\_ "You know, as your chief now, I demand some more respect."

\_Astrid suddenly frowned in a way that made me think for a moment her anger was awakening once again. Her eyes went slightly darker and her upper teeth jailed her lower lip while her brows joined in unison. Last thing I saw, was her arm being drawn back as high as she could,\_ \_tightening a strong fist and then banging her knuckles against my right lumbar region, cutting my breath in less than a second as I heard and saw her frantically laugh and sway joyfully side to side.

—

\_As if using violence on me resulted very pleasing. No kidding...\_

"Wh-why do-do you have to use violence!?"

\_Then, her hands found my bending body and brought them up to cup my face in them, bringing me into her height,\_ "No one bosses me around. And besides, you know that's not really violence. It's tough love." \_Grinning, her lips kissed my aching nose then pulled back as she ran

towards a boulder, climbed on it and called for Stormfly and Toothless who were fighting for a large, thin pine tree trunk at the other side of the cove. At the sound of her calls, they both dropped the insignificant tree and raced themselves towards us.

><em>

><em>Astrid rubbed on Toothless' scales before he would slip from her care and skip to me. Sitting right before me, he tilted his head in confusion as he saw me still rub on the aching sides of my body. I just shook my head and sighed, climbing onto his back,<em> "Same as usual, bud."

\_As if he had somehow understood me, Toothless turned his head to catch a look at my face and lowered his eyebrows in a teasing grimace, having me chuckle at him and playfully pat on his sides,\_"Don't start. Now let's go home."

\_With a playful groan, Toothless swayed happily side to side and with a quick glance at Stormfly, who was already waiting for his call, and having her rider well seated on her back. Then leaned forward.\_

\_Toothless steadied himself on the ground until he felt my chest lean forward on his back, his paws unburied themselves from the ground, skipped forward and with a quick flick on the pedal, we were already taking off to the skies.

><em>

\* \* \*

><p>"Hiccup, the only reason why I left my house was <em>that<em>. I wanted some alone time for once in my life."

"You still won't stay here all by yourself, Astrid, and that's final." \_I said while walking through the living room of our unfurnished cabin, kneeling to place a pile of blankets near the fireplace.\_

"You can't stay here with me, Hiccup. What will the village think if they find out?"

"That's why he brought some backup!" \_Fishlegs said emerging from the door, with a cocky smile, holding a huge, empty cauldron in his arms. Followed by Snotlout, who carried a\_ \_considerable amount of wood. Ruffnut followed in with arms full of fresh Salmon and then Tuffnut closed the door behind him with a quick foot kick since he had both arms busy, holding a closed, wooden box in.\_

"What in Helhaim's name are you guys doing here?" \_Astrid asked.\_

"I asked them to join us, for the night." \_I said, walking past her and starting to move the dining chairs aside to make more space.

><em>

>"Why?" <em>Her tone was vague. Clearly, she wasn't in the mood for being accompanied tonight. Unfortunately for her, I had no plans in pleasing her tonight by leaving her all by herself in an unfinished cabin, at night, when the breeze suddenly began to grow colder by the day as it got near winter season. As brave as she might be, as stubborn as she would get, my answer was final. I wasn't letting her spend a single night by herself while she is struggling through a hard situation that would define and twist the rest of her already

well planned life. <em>

\_Aside of all that, I secretly just wanted to spend as much time as I could near her. But...that's just between me and myself...for now.

><em>

>"Why complain anyway?" <em>Snotlout asked as he sat by the fireplace and began to fan the fire with an old cloth and every once in a while throwing a dry stick in. <em>

"Because I'm pretty sure I'm old enough for babysitters." \_Astrid replied dryly.\_

"Yeah, just think about it, Astrid," \_Tuffnut said while placing the big wooden box full of food on the stoned kitchen counter.\_ "Vivid fire, fresh salmon, baguettes, yak milk, cozy blankets... Just like camping!" \_He dropped his gaze for a second then back at her\_ "...indoors." \_He completed.\_

"More like a sleepover, actually." \_Fishlegs corrected as he mounted the cauldron on the hanger within the fireplace, kneeled to grab a bucket of water and poured it inside the cauldron.\_

"Exactly." \_I added, meeting her once again\_, "Since when don't we spend a night together like how we used to back when we were fifteen?"

"Yeah, it doesn't even feel like we're a gang anymore." \_Ruffnut said, already well comfortably seated on a near corner, legs crossed femur over ankle and a dark brown furred blanket curled in her hands.\_ "Everyone is awfully busy since we grew old."

"Yeah, what she said." \_Tuffnut said, pointing at his sister with his thumb from his spot by the\_ \_now open wooden box and then relaxed on his shoulders, looking at everyone else with messy eyes \_"Wait, what?!" \_He then glared back at her\_, "Hey, you're the one growing old!" \_His hand brushed proudly on his invisible beard\_, "I'm still as flatteringly young as a fresh perch."

\_I rose an eyebrow at the weird sound of his word selection, then shook it off by taking a hold of a pearly furred blanket and smiled warmly at her,\_ "Just, go with it for now, Astrid. What could possibly go wrong from spending the night accompanied by old friends?"

\_She hesitated, glaring still unconvinced at me, but as I insisted an exhilarated smile at her, she dropped her sharp attitude for once, and took the furs from me.\_ "Fine." \_Muttering, Astrid turned to the corner near the staircase and kneeled there. Unfolding the blankets, she bundled them into a messy handmade pillow and punched it twice before laying her head on it. \_

\_I shook my head, while watching her and walked back to her, grabbing two blankets from the floor on my way to her and sat right by her legs.\_ "Won't you eat first?"

"Not hungry."

"No?!" \_Fishlegs reacted, sounding slightly hurt\_, "But I'm making my grandma's unique specialty. Salmon stew!"

"You know, you should accept that if you want any future favors from him." \_I whispered into her ear after leaning closer to her. Seeing her smile at that, I grinned not helping she might have been thinking that she could take this opportunity to mock Fishlegs about knowing how to make one of his granny's recipes instead of making up his own.

><em>

>"What could I ever possibly need from him?" <em>She whispered back, a little dry, once again, making me frown for her sudden tune switch.<br>\_

>"He always comes in handy."<p>

"I want some of that!" \_Tuffnut's voice echoed through our whispering, brief conversation as he ran over to Fishlegs with a baguette in hand. Peeking into the cauldron to see if he could get a deeper sniff from the stew.\_

\_Fishlegs curled his brows together and snapped the hot spoon on Tuffnut's hand. Having him skip one step backwards, with a loud squeal, dropping the baguette to the floor and quickly rubbing on his now ardent skin.\_ "Dude! That hurt!"

"Do it again!" \_Ruffnut excitedly yelled from her spot and leaned forward with big, astounded eyes as\_ \_she watched her brother groan in pain.\_

"Such a baby..." \_Snotlout rolled his eyes and stood up from his spot by the fireplace.\_ "You know, we can play a game. To kill some time."

"What game?" \_Fishlegs asked, stirring the pot. \_

"How about Truth or Dare?" \_Snotlout suggested with a wry smile.\_

"Awesome!" \_Tuffnut exclaimed, finally moving away from the still cooking stew and crawled to where his sister was at\_. "Haven't played that in years."

"Are you certain you remember how it's even played?" \_Astrid asked\_.

"Uuuhâ€|.no." \_Tuffnut answered, scratching on his right temple\_ "Has to do with no lying, right?"

"That, and doing as you're told." \_Snotlout grinned.\_ "So, whose up first!?"

"Not me, count me out. I prefer not to get involved in trouble once again after last time." \_Fishlegs said, turning his broad back at everyone else.

><em>

>"I'm pretty sure no one remembers what happened." <em>Astrid grinned.<em>

\_Snotlout laughed all of the sudden\_, "Yeah, like dared to kiss a black sheep's ass after sticking a candle in it would be a hard thing to forget."

\_Everyone laughed, Fishlegs turned chili red and I just chuckled, trying not to bite my lips so hard in order to keep myself from laughing.\_

"Not funny guys." \_Fishlegs complained, relieving the cauldron from the position over the fire and sliding the holder a little further from the flames. He then started serving into shallow, ceramic containers. \_

\_Ruffnut snickered,\_ "Are we playing or not?!"

"Yes!" \_Tuffnut and Snotlout answered at the same time.\_

"No!" \_Fishlegs and Astrid as well.\_

\_I just rolled my eyes at them all and got comfortable, against Astrid's legs before groaning at the \_thought of having to stand up once again as I saw how Fishlegs glanced over his shoulder back at me, with a pleading look in his eyes, as if that were enough to make me get up and go help him with the servings.

><em>

>"Whatever, I'll start." <em>Ruffnut glanced slowly at each of the teens around her, thinking deeply on who she should make target of first, then she smirked back at her first victim,<em>

"Snotlout!"

\_He whimpered\_, "Yes, my dearest princess?"

"I dare you to sniff my brother's butt!"

"Seriously!? Why!?"

"Awesome! Hurry up!" \_Tuffnut clapped twice before leaning forward, kneeling and positioning himself, supporting his weight on both his knees and knuckles. All his dorsal side facing the ceiling and his less nice parts, facing Snotlout.\_

"Do it!" \_Ruffnut grinned all excited as she leaned forward, decided to get the best view of this.\_

"Oh no... Don't tell me we have to see this," \_I mumbled as I walked back to Astrid, holding two servings in my hands, offering her one as I waited for her to sit back up and accept my offering.\_

"If you don't do it, you have to drink yak pee instead of milk for two days straight." \_Tuffnut informed.

><em>

>"Mm, gaah! Alright, alright." <em>Snotlout took in a deep breath, buffed his chest up and exhaled in defeat before crawling forward, and sooner than he had even expected, his nose had reached not so close to Tuffnut's bottom when the peculiarly not pleasant odor slapped his cheeks and practically broke all sense of smell he had left as he fell back on his own butt and squeezed on his nose. As if that would relieve him from that horrid smell not even close to a giant's foot. <em>"Dude?! What the...!"

"Like it?" \_Tuffnut sat back straight. Laughing enjoyably,\_ "I haven't showered in three months straight. I call it a new record."



"Geesh, call it a new condemnation, should be the correct term."  
\_Snotlout answered.  
><em>  
>"And that's what you get when you want to play Truth or Dare,"  
<em>Astrid said.<em>

"What would you know?!" \_Snotlout growled before taking the bowl of stew I had offered him, \_\_trying to take in as much as he could from the scent. As if he could replace the horrid one with a pleasant one.\_\_

"Actually, she's right, Snotlout. I mean, it was \_your\_ idea after all." \_I said, taking two more servings for the twins.\_\_

"Oh, shut up, Hiccup!" \_Snotlout\_ \_said\_, "Now it's my turn. I dare you to have some of my salmon stew!"  
><em><br>My sight at him grew tired\_, "Seriously?"

"That it?" \_Ruffnut asked, displeased.\_\_

"Yes."\_ Snotlout said, offering his bowl to me and as I moved to take his dare, he pulled his plate back and spit a large amount of saliva in it. Then offered it back to me.  
><em>  
>"Cool, baptized salmon stew!" <em>Tuffnut said.<br>\_<br>>"Snotlout, that's too low." <em>Astrid hissed from the other side of the room. <em>

"Not as low as making me kiss another man's ass."

"Not kiss, sniffed. And that's something completely different."  
\_Ruffnut clarified.\_\_

"Still, I dare my dearest chief cousin to have some of my now slimy salmon stew. See how proper he truly is. Otherwise, you'll be drinking yak pee for two days straight."

I did hesitate. Of course, trying to suck into the possibilities of catching an awful illness from drinking Snotlout's greenish oral excretions which were haunting me down in less than a second. \_Yet, drinking Yak pee, didn't sound very much relieving either. So I just had to make a quick choice before Snotlout would make me do something else. This said, I swallowed heavily and took in his bowl in my hands, brought the ceramic slowly to my lips and with anticipated regrets, a large, icky ball of heavy manly excretions went down my throat, making my entire body shaken up in disgust at the thought of my resent action before stepping back and dropping myself on my bottom by Astrid's side, who wrapped an arm around my shoulders and brought me closer. Making me crash my back against her.\_\_

\_ Her other hand rested on my chest, patting gently as if to relieve me from choking any louder thanks to the repulsive, trashy flavor.\_\_

"You okay?" \_She mumbled.

><em>  
>"Yeah, unfortunately, the salmon did no good in hiding out the other content's flavors."<br>\_<br>>Chuckling, Astrid kissed my cheek and then let go of me to continue eating her stew. I glanced down at the full serving for myself and

couldn't help but to stick the tip of my tongue out in repulsion, not really wanting anything liquid going down my throat for the night.  
<em>

"I think I'll stick with the bread." \_I muttered while taking her own piece of bread and grabbing a bite. Not really caring for her sudden frowns and glares. I just ate her bread and my own silently and peacefully. \_

\_Later that night, when everyone was lost, deep in sleep, Toothless had stomped into the cabin and made his way comfortably by Astrid and I. She was already asleep, facing the staircase, her back to me.

\_

\_I used the black furred blankets I had taken for myself to cover her up to her shoulders. Fortunately for both of us, the furs were big enough for us both to fit in comfortably. But right now, I was far from feeling sleepy. Exhausted, maybe, but without any desire of closing my eyes and accepting that there was to be another day closer to what could be the chances of having my wife be snatched away in a heartbeat.\_

\_ I enjoyed giving Astrid the rights to decide for herself, even if not all married woman had that privilege, I loved a free spirited Astrid more than anything else in this world. Though, knowing how now her voice could be barely listened to if she gets to marry Billus for Berk's sake, it only bothered me how temperamental she would get, how violently impossible, as if defending for her own freedom would be the last thing she ever dared to do. And without a doubt, she surely would.\_

><em><br>Toothless released a low purr at the feeling of my fingers gently scrubbing on his scales as I silently got lost in my own thoughts and burdens. I knew how much of a fearless warrior she was, how she wouldn't accept a no for an answer, how she would defy any law, rip out a heart from a man's chest all so violently...whatnot? And all for regaining her own freedom.\_

\_ I wouldn't ask her to go back home to her mother, I just couldn't. I had to accept her choice in wanting to stay away from a mother that could annoy her enough with the same subject every time she had a chance. I had to understand her temperamental, sudden impulses.\_

"But, I can see and no less understand that now, she's the one who needs me the most, bud. And we are getting her out of this."

"Yes, but how can we succeed without endangering Berk?"\_ Fishlegs whispered, pulling me out of my sudden train of thoughts as I glanced back at him, seeing how he was pushing himself up on his elbow, to catch a glimpse back at me from his sleeping corner almost under the dining table, just a few steps away from Toothless. Had I been speaking out my thoughts? How much had he listened?\_

\_Shaking it off, my hands slowed down their scratches, as I could then hear Toothless' snores deepen beneath my touch.\_ "We reason with our new visitors, get to an agreement."

"Hate to break it to you, Hiccup, but the possibilities of triumphing with taking in a reasonable talk between tribes in order to relieve a woman from a suddenly arranged marriage, are completely below five

percent."

"And that minus five percent left, is all we need."

"Um, would you please be more specific, Hiccup?"

\_I snickered before glancing back at him, still not getting my fingertips off my best friend's cheeks, \_"Through some old investigation..."

"But, investigating takes time, Hiccup. You can't possibly expect to have fast, effective and durable results in no less than a day."

"Oh, but we can." \_I\_ \_confirmed\_, "Before sunup, you and I will get our hands busy. No resting until we find what we need. Something that would get us out of this mess without risking the village's safety."

><em><br>Even though Fishlegs' eyes were completely unconvinced, he didn't say another word. He just nodded and laid on his back, turned on his side giving his back at me and in no less than five minutes, his snores were evident\_\_.

\_Everyone was terribly exhausted. I could tell that by their loud snores and on how fast they all fell asleep. Even Astrid. She didn't snore, but when I positioned myself back down beside her, I could hear her heavy breathings, as if she had been struggling for some freedom even in the intimacy of her dreams. But I was decided, as I gently ran a hand on her waist to keep her close, careful not to wake her, laid my face near the back of her neck, took in her sweet, lavender scent, and closed my eyes. Allowing her presence to fill in every corner of my mind, heart and soul, having them relax with the simple thought of having her near once\_ \_more. Forgetting how I've been taking her for granted for nearly two months, how she had always forgiven my unexplained, distant behavior, how she had understood every mood that emerged from me day by day, without a fuzz. How she had suddenly allowed her anger take over her good will and make her commit actions she would later consider as inadequate. But I just...had to understand her. Just like how she always found a way to understand my casual confounded behavior, I needed to understand hers as well. She was human after all, and not just that, she was mine. All mine ever since I first laid eyes on her and began praying the gods above for some opportunity to have her as a lifelong companion. Now that I finally got that wish granted, I can't just dishonor the gods, my dad, her... By letting her be claimed by another man\_ \_so easily. This was why, I made my choice. Restlessly, I will search for as much as I have and need in order to get her out of this mess myself.\_

\_Even, if it is the last thing I do...\_

To be Continued.

## 8. Steal Your Pain Away

When was the last time I had the chance to wrap my arms around her during her deep slumber? Perhaps last year, when we used to frequently train out in the wilderness, spending several nights and days out there, as part of training. Well, as hard as it might be to

believe, Astrid was the one who usually crawled in the middle of the night, when everyone else was already fast asleep, making her own way to my side. Then, it wasn't until the next morning I realized Toothless wasn't the only one claiming my personal boundaries. She was so silent and motionless back then. But, tonight, she stirred and kicked on my knees as if she'd been trying to defend herself in battle.

She barely let me sleep at all...

Sometime around the early morning, her unsteady kicks ceased and I took that chance to tangle my legs in hers so she wouldn't move so easily again, without noticing something holding her still or disrupting her unknown dreams.

She didn't move again for a while, though. Her head had tilted to the side and her body turned to her right, facing my chest. A hand hid somewhere in it and her lips parted.

I couldn't help myself but to stare down at her. Who could ever thought that \_I\_, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the third, wimpy son of Stoick the Vast, natural failure amongst Viking cultures, could have ever been noticed by such brave, fearless, daring...beautiful lady, like \_Astrid\_?

For years I'd been wondering if she noticed me after I stood out at the arena with all the dragons all of the sudden, applying everything I learned from being with Toothless, with them back at training. Probably, that had been the reason why at first, I didn't believe our relationship could be, well \_serious\_ all those few months afterwards. Until one evening, within the intimacy of my own bedroom, I just couldn't find ways to fall peacefully asleep—reasons I can't even remember—and then I asked myself the very same question. Was it after I'd been recognized as not exactly a loser?

Then, a quick reminder haunted my memories as I saw her back at the last Thawfest by that era. I almost won over a terribly prideful Snotlout, she came back to me and asked, \_'Do you know what I always liked about you, Hiccup?\_'

And \_those\_ were the key to my troubled doubts. After such, I realized how much while I was an invisible, worthless maggot within the Village, long before Toothless came to form part of my life, I had caught her silently glance every once in a while\_, back at me\_.

At times, she would pass by the blacksmith shop to pick up some weapons and Gobber was always the one to attend her. I, on the other hand, had been working on some sketches, designing or polishing some other things and always took the chance to glance over the shiny metal hanging on the wall before me, which reflected everything far behind me. Recalling how one day, I caught her several times staring right at \_me\_.

At first, all my life, I've believed she was looking at some kind of weapon that might have seized her attention, but no. She was looking at me. Was that why she'd always been so curious on what I do around the village?

Now, all I knew was how much she mattered to me, no matter how much

of a jerk I've behaved with her in the past few monthsâ€”after dad had past off with the other great warriors, to Valhalla.

My lips, suddenly found themselves against the skin of her cold temples, brushing the whispering words against her soft skin, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to involve you in any of my own burdens, Astrid. I wanted to fight the odds by myself, I know, it had been painful for me as well." Sighs "...and I didn't realize I was pushing you down an abyss where I could never reach out for you again. After Hollibus' chief arrived Berk and claimed you as his son's wedded wife to be." Chuckles, "What's worse, you never complained out loud." My nose pressed against her cheek, "You only waited, behaved like my shadow, worrying even after being treated like crap. You...always showed \_patience\_."

My jaw clenched at the thought of that regretful memory as my brows curled up in a tight frown, "I swear, I will do \_everything\_ in my power to stop this marriage. There \_must\_ be another way."

"Um, Hiccup?" Eyes snapped back open, thinking for a slight moment I had spoken too loud, that she had heard me, that someone had noticed Astrid and I were sleeping so close against each other, under the same furs. But then, I realized Toothless was still loudly snoring against my back. So it was impossible for anyone to see us through such a big black dragon.

"Hiccup?" There it was again. My head tilted upwards and then I saw Fishlegs' head peeking out from Toothless' massive back. My heart pounded nonstop at the sudden thought of it being someone else, who just saw us cuddled up together, like this.

But Fishlegs wasn't just \_someone else\_, he turned out to be mine and Astrid's confident. As hard as it is to be believed, Fishlegs managed quite well all of our reckless moves.

"Oh, Fishlegs... It's just you." I sighed in relief.

"Hate to disturb you, Hiccup, but its two hours before dawn."

"Right," I nodded, "I'll be up in a minute. Thanks."

Fishlegs just nodded, uncertain, then turned and walked out of sight.

As much as I hated to unglue myself from her, I knew this was very much \_necessary\_. Even if I just had one or two hours of rest.

Leaning forward, closer to her, I kissed her forehead and while feeling Toothless growling within before stirring and finally sitting back up, looking down at us with wide curiosity, I just rose my hand from her waist to her cheeks and gently caressed them, brushing my lips down the line of her nose, and finally, her lips.

Encasing her lowest one, trapping her jawline in my hand so she wouldn't pull away once I felt her uncomfortably move beneath me. No doubt, I had woken her up. But I wanted to stubbornly take advantage of her lips before moving away from her for the rest of the day. I wanted to own her lips before they touched Stormfly's scales, before

they had food past through them and down her throat, before words were even spoken. Those were my lips to claim, and I wanted to ravage them at once.

Few seconds later, her body relaxed and soon, her lips were challenging my own.

Cold, slow fingertips traveled up my rising and falling chest, then stopped on the back of my neck. Her tongue curiously peeked from her lips and poked on my own, parting them and sliding daringly into my mouth. Without a second thought, I took her in. Tonguing hers once, maybe twice, or even three times before our lips emitted a loud noise once I pulled them apart and rapidly kissed her cheek, then pulled completely away from her.

Astrid's big, deep blue eyes stared confused at me. I just smiled sheepishly, and rubbed my thumb on her jawline, "Go back to sleep. I have to go, now."

She didn't complain. Hel, she didn't even say a word nor made a single move aside from slightly nodding and her lips drawing a small, sleepy smile.

Her eyes looked tired, as if they weighted extra on her face, so she closed them once again.

Were those little bottomless eyes the ones I was destined to see every morning? The very last ones to admire at sundown? I'm not sure...but I surely hoped so.

I might not be sure of what destiny involving Astrid would look like, but I am completely certain on how I want it to be like.

Time ran out. Without letting her charming presence bewitch me once again, I took a hold of her wrist and pulled it away from my neck, then I sat back up and turned to glance at Toothless, who was still looking down at us, this time showing his gums in a curiously pleasant way. I pouted and then chuckled, standing up and pushing the dragon's stalking head away, "Show's over, bud. Let's go."

Toothless hummed what sounded more like a mocking laugh, then went away directly to the front door.

\* \* \*

><p>Day two...day two...day two...day two...day two...<p>

Those were the only two words taking place in her mind from the moment she walked out what was initially meant to be hers and Hiccup's house, and strolled down the dry grounds of her unordinary village. The day didn't feel warm at all. It was cool and most likely enjoyable instead. The wind seemed to behave, keeping its frequency to a minimum. The sun...where was the sun at today?

No, there was no sun at all. Just dark gray clouds slowly moving over the island.

Her feet came to a sharp stop when the drapes of the blacksmith's shop were almost brushing against her nose. She swung them aside and slid herself in. The place was empty. No one taking orders, no one

fixing broken or missing dragon teeth, no one sketching new designs, no one working on the metal...well...no one in!

"Hiccup?" She called, moving as graceful as she could, just so she wouldn't step on one of his oh-so-precious-projects. He had scolded her several times before for being overly brusque around his projects and today, playfully steaming him up wasn't exactly on the top of her list. "Gobber? Fishlegs? Anyone here?"

Not a sound. Not a soul.

"I'll purposely break something if no one comes out!" She grinned, as if her little fake threat would make someone magically appear and give her the kind of assistance she demanded. But her grin switched into a disappointed pout.

It was clear no one would answer her anyway, so she sighed aloud and turned on her heels. Decided to search elsewhere when her eyes found a new form of distraction at what she saw...

At the far end of her left side, there was a big-something- covered in a light brown blanket. Curiosity hit her "as per usual" and soon she found herself standing right beside that new big obstacle. Another one of Hiccup's projects? Or was this one from Fishlegs?

Gripping on the blanket's hem, a quick swoosh from both her arms removed the sheet, revealing an unfinished, yet stunning masterpiece. On either poles of the headboard, there were two perfectly sculpted dragon heads. On the right pole, one with a spiked crown on its head, mouth closed, as if on guard, but instead of facing forward, it faced to the side. The other dragon head was far different from the first. This one's head was fairly flat, long ears on both sides and big, wide-opened eyes.

Both dragons, were facing each other. Her fingers slowly traced up on what looked like a perfect replica of Stormfly's head, made out of fine wood. Then, they went down the pole and danced along the side frames. The mattress was missing, but this King-Sized work of art didn't need a mattress to look at all enchanting. As she pulled her fingers back from the well-polished wood, her eyes blinked in realization...

A bed... How long has he been working on this? Was it even really to be ours?-She thought.

Her fingers slowly moved to touch the wood once again and noticed that the framed cuts and details were still a little rough to the touch. Meaning that it hadn't been more than hours since it was last worked on.

Is he still working on this? But...why so?-She thought.

Her teeth clenched. A sudden wave of disapproval shadowing those of confusion and joy within her battered heart attacked her limited inner peace.

"He's not going to give up, is he?" She asked herself with a frown. Knowing him all too well.

How much had she wished to actually be the one with this kind of encouragement he emitted, to fight off the possibilities of slipping off this sudden arrangement, to reveal the true and daring Viking that has always lived inside her. But this time, it was obvious that she couldn't move a finger or say a word on it that would actually be considered. As much of a Viking she would have within, traditions were still just that...traditions. And as Vikings, they had to respect their own laws. Otherwise, everything in their lives would be a sick mess.

Understanding that, Astrid took in a forced deep breath and let it go as if spitting out poison from her lungs, turning on her heel and stormed out of the blacksmith shop.

"Mornin' Astrid!" A hefty, blonde Haired Viking said most cheerfully, waving his axe in salutation at her.

She slightly nodded in response.

"Oi, Astrid! Morning lass!" Another Viking saluted. This one was carrying two white sheep as he passed by the female Viking.

Bowing her head once again in response, this time, a weak smile tracing her lips. People seemed to have woken up on a nicer side today...

And here I thought I'd be black-eyed since the last argument at the Meade Hall. Turns out, no one actually cared about what Ruffnut had said back then."\_she thought.

"For the least..." She muttered to herself till her feet guided her to Mulch, a heavily dark-brown haired Viking, who was now pushing an empty cart, "Mulch!"

Mulch's beard-braids slightly swung on the rest of that long and loose beard of his when his head turned to glance at Astrid as she jogged to him, "Oi, good mornin' Astrid!"

"Hey." She replied nodding the courtesies aside for once and going straight to the point, "Have you seen Hiccup, today?"

"Oh, yes! I am on my way teh him. He's at the Great Hall."

She was about to ask if he needed any help with the cart when her gaze lifted and saw Hiccup greeting Toothless at the Great Hall's entrance. He was frantically rubbing on his dragon's chin and sides of neck when she smiled a quick 'thanks' to Mulch and jogged up the hill to the enthusiastic boy.

"Hiccup!"

He flinched and though it was quick, she had noticed his instant nerves waking up as he stopped rubbing on Toothless and just kept his hands cuddling him close.

His lips formed a warm smile at her and once she was finally before him, he said "Good morning milady." His smile widened once he saw her grin in response, "Did you sleep well?"

"Better than ever."



Hiccup chuckled and looked back down at a curious Toothless who was silently shifting glances from the male to the female before him, "You always say that."

She shrugged her right shoulder, "I do when I sleep with you, anyway." Bringing a hand to Toothless' sides, gently rubbing him as well, "Feels more peaceful and pleasant."

Hiccup chewed on his lower lip before dropping his hands from Toothless and just focusing on her, his cheekbones swiftly showing a shade of pale pink as he took one step closer, "Likewise."

There was a slight moment of silence between them when her fingertips gently danced on the Night Fury's back and eyes locked on the slim Viking before her. Then, when she finally dropped her gaze and increased the affection towards the now purring Dragon, she said, "I wanted to tell you something. I won't be available to help in the Village nor the Dragon Training Academy today."

Hiccup's brow rose, "Why not?"

"Because I was planning on taking Stormfly out for a flight. Share the day with her." She shrugged, "I was looking for Fishlegs, to ask him if he could take over at the Academy but I couldn't find him anywhere so I asked your mom to take charge instead. Then I went looking for him again, but nothing yet."

"Um...yeah...uh..." Hiccup began to guiltily scratch the back of his head, shifting his glances to undetermined points around him, "About Fishlegs...uh...I need him for something really important so, he won't be anywhere near the Academy today either."

Astrid rose a brow in confusion as she glanced back at Hiccup, "Something really important?" She quoted, "Like what?"

"Nothing!" His sudden blurt at her made her frown at him, then he gaged, "Ah, I mean, nothing you'd need to know \_right now\_. You just enjoy your day out with Stormfly."

"Hiccup, if you need any help, I can justâ€"

"No!" He cut her off, "I mean...don't worry about me, I'll be fine, you go find Stormfly."

"Are you trying to get rid of me?" She pouted.

"As a matter of fact, \_yes, he is\_." Fishlegs said as he walked out from the only open door to the Great Hall, and climbed down the stairs to them.

Hiccup shot a stoned glare at Fishlegs who wasn't even looking at him.

"Care to explain?" Astrid asked, feeling slightly annoyed by the thought of suddenly being unwanted.

"Wh-wh-what Fishlegs really meant is that soon, we will explain everything to you but for now, we can't. Look at it from the point of being a nice, innocent and small secret between um...well...between

guys."

Astrid crossed her arms over her chest, frowning at Hiccup. Clearly with Astrid, her eyes usually yelled what her lips reserved.

Hiccup chuckled and walked closer to her, resting both hands on her arms and shyly searching for a drop of mild ease in her eyes, "I know you hate secrets, Astrid, but this is really necessary. I promise I'll tell you at the right moment. For now...I'll cover up for you throughout the day, how's that?"

His words might have relaxed her arms a little, having her unlock her laced limbs and dropping them to her sides, catching his hands in hers, slightly nodding in agreement.

Hiccup smiled warmly at her, "You know, if I asked you if I could go with you on this flight, if I had chance to do so, would you let me?"

Her cheeks rose and pinched into a pale shade of pink. Lips revealing nicely cleaned teeth with a small smile, "I always want you to fly with me."

Hiccup's eyes brightened, but then shifted alarmed as she pulled her hand from his, took a grip on his suit's buckle and brusquely pulled him into a strong lip crash.

Astrid knew she was risking everything with just a public kiss with the man who once was hers to keep, and now had turned into a forbidden fruit for her to take. She knew that if seen by someone not that close to their little circle of trust, then her actions would be considered as treason and dishonor. But given the kind of Viking she was, at the moment, she could care less.

Hiccup gave into the kiss, taking the initiative of pushing his tongue into her mouth and poking on hers before caressing it as gentle as usual. Few seconds later, he parted their lips from each other, gazing back into her eyes, "I'll see you later, tonight."

Astrid chewed on her inner cheeks, "I...don't think I'll be in for dinner, Hiccup."

Hiccup's smile fell, "Why not?"

"Mm, because I don't know exactly at what time will I be back."

Hiccup's lips parted, taking in some air before spreading words to reply to her statement when a sudden thought took away his desires of further speech. Instead, his lips sealed once again and his head nodded once.

Deciding to let her be, to give her the kind of space she demanded even if he wasn't exactly agreeing with it. Yet, who was he to stand in Astrid Hofferson's way? As high as his place in her life was, Hiccup knew that now more than ever before, he had to do his best to keep her calm enough...just to prevent some unnecessary blood spread.

A low squawk made both of their heads turn and glance over at Toothless and Stormfly heading towards them. Exactly, when did Toothless leave their side?

When they were kissing...perhaps?

"Toothless!" Astrid exclaimed all cheerful once she saw her girl, "You brought her to me?"

Walking towards the dragons, Astrid rubbed on his chin, having him purr and smile proudly at her before she pulled away and spread both arms wide open, inviting that light blue dragon who immediately leaned in and allowed her rider to cuddle her head into a very affectionate embrace. "Thank you!"

Hiccup laughed, "Yeah, curious on how fast and silent you found her, bud."

Toothless just rose his neck in a proud position. As if pointing out that no dragon so far could be as agile as he was.

Hiccup smelled that familiar sense of pride and chuckled before palming his big blackened head to the side and starting to walk up the stairs, "Come on, you. Time to get back to work."

Not another word was spoken as Astrid turned her back on the two males and quickly revised Stormfly's already packed up bag, just to make sure she wasn't missing anything. Food, ropes, blankets, bow and arrow, a rubber ball and of course, her axe. All was in. Thankfully.

Hooking her right foot on the iron stirrup, pushing herself into a quick leg swing and moving her bum side to side until comfortable, Astrid glanced back at Hiccup who was now standing right by the Great Hall's large doors, holding one of them still slightly open, just enough for him to slide in. His lips curled up into a sheepish smile which she returned with doubled the enthusiasm he wasn't showing.

Toothless had moved inside first, leaving Hiccup all by himself.

"Dumb words you say! Weather back to Hollibus Island will be exquisite, if not then so devour me Thor!"

That voice...it was awfully familiar and in the most terrible ways of all as the sudden queasiness in her stomach made her snap her head to her left and push her tarsals hard against the stirrups, rising her bum just a little from the seat.

The words she just heard weren't as close as thought. They came from what seemed to be up the road and effectively, they were getting louder.

Billus "she mouthed, allowing her buttocks fall back on the seat as she leaned forward, tapped her fingertips on Stormfly's side of neck and with a sharp voice and curling up a tight frown she said "Let's go girl, up!"

In no less than a blink, Stormfly left the grounds and with a loud

cracking noise from her lungs, she beamed through the defying wind, zigzagged all obstacles before her and finally stretching her wings through the wide clear skies as the village soon became just a small fogged memory below and behind them.

Astrid straightened her back, turning over her shoulder, see if she could catch a glimpse of Hiccup. Her eyes suddenly sad and unbelievably guilty for showing how she was capable of flying away in just a gush, without a single goodbye. But she \_couldn't\_ see him...by the time she chose to glimpse back for him, a wide gray cloud draped over their home village. So she took in a deep breath, and as she let it go, her torso leaned forward and just focused on riding for a while longer before determining what she'll do throughout the day.

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><p>"Awesome! Can we do it again?" Tuffnut asked as Barf and Belch flew back into the Academy followed by Hookfang, Skullcrusher and then Cloudjumper.<p>

Valka laughed, "I believe that can be enough for today. Hiccup might need your assistance."

"Are you seriously relieving us for the day?!" Ruffnut asked, mouth dropped. "But it's not even midday yet."

Valka gracefully nodded, "I am. Surprised much?"

"Actually, we \_are\_." Snotlout responded while hopping down from Hookfang's back, "Astrid makes us train hard enough until we bleed instead of sweat."

"I don't believe we need to reach extremities." Valka chuckled.

Snotlout shrugged, "Well, close enough. She only gives us break time when she's in a good mood...which is nearly never. Plus, she always makes us train until we explode like bombardier beetles. There was this one time, when she sent us all into the depths of a supposedly dormant volcano." His uncanny tone gave emphasis to his words when he contracted and relaxed both of his index and middle fingers twice to point out the volcano's state of living. Then, his arms and face shimmered as his hands ghostly moved to his buttocks and slowly rubbed them at the memory that suddenly flashed across his head.

"Ugh, please, don't remind me." Tuffnut rolled his entire face along with his eyes, "I spent all night being a Hideous Zippleback's favorite popsicle."

"Uh...\_nou\_," Ruffnut intruded, both arms crossed, looking up at her brother, "You fell asleep in the cauldron after we got home from training."

"Did I?" Tuffnut asked, clueless, bringing a finger up to his vaguely dropped lips, then shrugged and pointed at his sister, "But then I was liked by the dragon!"

"Are you certain it wasn't a dream, Tuffnut?" Valka asked, a small

yet unsure side-lift of her lip.

Tuffnut blinked, "Hum...maybe. Maybe not."

Valka kept her smile, shaking her head in disbelief, "Well, anyway, I am glad to know you liked today's session . Hiccup asked me to be elsewhere after training, so I'll be going now." That said, Valka nodded once as a farewell and waved her hand for Cloudjumper as she began walking out the Dragon Academy Gates, having the massive Stormcutter follow her in utter silence.

Once the wise dragon rider was gone, the other four riders were left behind. Eret, who was currently dismounting Skullcrusher, and then began loosening the saddle from the dragon's hardened back, planning not to speak, but to turn on his own heel and peacefully flee from those same grounds that tied him into an upcoming sea of unbearable questions. He was in no good of a mood to answer to any asking coming from anyone, especially \_Ruffnut\_.

He only desired for silence and silence alone. What he had said, back at her house, were only words spilling from his tongue out of mere impulse. Being a dragon trapper, was all he knew most of his life, and even though for the most, he would have preferred it to stay that way. Even known as a recently dragon riding apprentice, was more than enough. But nothing else, nothing more from him was intended to be brought out to the light.

As his presence dissipated from closer sights, Tuffnut hopped on one of the empty carts and scooted his bum side to side until comfortable. "Sooo..." He began "What do we do now?"

"We can cook Fishlegs' underpants and serve him some underwear-soup for dinner." Ruffnut suggested, as she leaned her lower back against the edges of the cart where her brother sat on, resting both knuckles on her sides and smirking deviously.

"Nah, he won't want to eat anything from us." Tuffnut said.

Ruffnut's little evil smile faded away as she realized her brother was \_actually\_ \_right\_. They usually underestimated Fishlegs' intelligence as much as they've underestimated everyone else's.

Tuffnut's mouth hung open, "Uh, but then we force it into him!"

Snotlout rubbed on his barely visible beard. "though, he \_believed\_ he had an incredible outgrow. "Hm, I don't know, I rather do pranks on Son of Weasels."

"Wait, do we know any Son of Weasels?" Tuffnut asked, making Snotlout sigh in exasperation.

Ruffnut frowned at his ways of referring to Eret. But before she could say something about it, Tuffnut intruded, "Hey wait a minute, that reminds me, should we tell Astrid about our prank?"

"Yes, of course! If you want to lose your head to sharks, that is." Snotlout snorted in his own sarcasm.

"That'd be cool." Ruffnut said, smiling widely once again, "Tuffnut's head turned into Shark food!"

"Oh yeah? And why won't your head join mine?" He crossed his arms over his chest and moved his head facing the opposite direction from his sister.

"Not a bad idea." Ruffnut agreed. "Besides, my head should taste better than yours anyway. Yours would smell and taste like dragon shit."

"Wait," Tuffnut's eyes snapped widely open "Can sharks smell people?"

"Tsk, duh." Ruffnut mocked.

"Of course they do!" Snotlout added, walking toward them, fixing on his vest. Barf and Belch watching the three of them from a far behind distance from the twins while Hookfang rubbed his nose against his wing.

"They can smell you from wherever they are, in fact," Snotlout continued "They can even tell where you are right now."

Tuffnut's jaw fell as he stared at the other male in utter shock, "No, way." His disbelief was obvious, dropping from his every words as he hopped from the cart, making it slightly rumble and his sister lose balance for a brief second. "I've got to witness that!"

Rushed, the male twin ran out of the arena, having both dragons watch him disappear into the distance with a confused glance before turning their heads back to what now looked like a supposedly fearless Viking turn into a sloppy poet.

"You know, now that we are all alone, I can tell how stunningly bright your hair looks out in the sunlight." Snotlout said.

An approach that felt rather suffocating, Ruffnut rolled on her eyes, crossed her arms over her chest and turned her head away, snorting.

Snotlout held his tentative smile as he moved a hand down her left hair-tail and brought the ends up to his nose, taking in a strange oiled fish scent that made him shudder in delight and let it go as slow as his lungs would allow him to.

"Would you stop?" Ruffnut snapped.

"Never, my princess. Never."

Ruffnut sighed in exasperation and slipped from his invisible personal boundaries "You know, I might have some of those Achlys fruits left."

Snotlout turned to look straight at her, his expression still overjoyed, "Ah, desiring to blur my memories and poison my energies to unconscious, my dear?"

Ruffnut rose a brow, his tone was completely out of what she was used

to hear from Snotlout. A usually persistent Viking male now talking in a strange vocabulary to her, one she didn't even expect him to know.

Had a Yak used his small brain as a seat earlier?

Taking advantage of her silence, Snotlout chuckled, seeming slightly serious once again, his expression suddenly shifted to curiously-worried "Besides, shouldn't you \_get rid\_ of those fruits anyway?"

Ruffnut shrugged. Barf and Belch walked behind her and as she rose an arm to the dragon, Barf moved his head to position it beneath the girl's palm, happily willing to have his daily caring session.

"She won't find out. Ever." She said.

Snotlout brought his hand back up to his chin and once again rubbed on what he actually thought was a grown beard, "Hm, I don't know...Astrid is not as stupid as you may think."

Ruffnut didn't answer that. She shifted all of her attention to the dragon enjoying her affections and soon, forgot how she had brewed Achlys fruits and served them in Astrid's mug as an innocent prank from the four rascalsâ€"including Fishlegsâ€"having her to drink it after dancing all night with only one partner and soon watch her get tired and dizzy all of the sudden.

Perhaps, they miscalculated the amount of Achlys brewed fruits they had to give her.

All the while, Ruffnut planned in keeping their little prank for as long as possible, for she wasn't happy with the idea of ending up eyeless or some sort. So up till now, she just hushed herself and allowed Snotlout's voice become a minor sound on the back of her head.

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><p>"Ready, girl?"<p>

"Guak-ouuk!"

Sparkling fire emerging from her ferocious mouth in long, shooting-star form as it blasted the rocks Astrid threw for her, making it rain pebbles down to the ground. Overly joyed and pleased with her own bull's-eye, being constantly encouraged by Astrid's triumphal laughter.

They both experienced a smooth dayâ€"in Astrid's very own definition of smooth, which is pure adrenalineâ€"since after practicing air-aim, Stormfly took them to Baldr's falls. An island they discovered along with Hiccup and Toothless, distinct from all the others from the water that fell from long streams coming from the highest peaks of mountains and instead of brusquely falling directly down to the wide and salty ocean, those delicate waters graced down at an incredibly slow pace, as if cursively dancing on large stones until they reach the bottom end.

Water? Crystal clear. Fish, algae and coral were easily seen through

the waters as much as the smallest stones beneath them. Dark green grass all around the place, nothing was dead, nothing was sick or wrong. Large trees full of apples, peaches, and colorful flowers. Fresh and cool breeze, serving as a quick reminder that winter impatiently approached Berk with every following-sunrise.

Flying to Baldr's falls, not only allowed her to feel as if she could break free for just a few hours. She could feel that in any other island or whichever the wind pushed her to. No, Baldr was special.

Crawling directly to the edge of the cliff, biting daringly on her lower lip, stopping herself just a few inches from the edge, right beneath a lively orange tree, her legs moved to straighten themselves on the ground, back flat against the cool grass, a hand resting on her stomach as the other was thrown behind her head to serve as a pillow as her eyes got lost into the clear blue skies. Stormfly made herself comfortable nearby Astrid and rested her chin on her shoulder, scratching her nose horn against her wing and then rising her head curiously watching the birds fly in groups across their sky.

Astrid closed her eyes and took in a long deep breath, "Feels good, doesn't it Stormfly?"

Stormfly looked down at her, tilted her head to the right then to the left before pushing her neck forward as a sign of agreement. Then moved her head back to glance at the birds.

Astrid's eyes reopened, watching the birds as well. There was only one thing missing to that nice feeling growing within her chest.  
\_Hiccup\_.

It had been a while since they took a complete day of flying together and simply getting themselves purposely lost. The thought of him brought her hands together on the low of her abdomen. Fingers absently rubbing against knuckles until they felt that new golden band adorning her annular finger.

Remembering what was so special about this place. How the tall island of Baldr, had become one of her favorite lands discovered by her and Hiccup yet. Allowing herself drown back into forgetful streams that would make her forget all evil and curses that had been surrounding her soul for the past few months, for the past few days. Drowning into the refreshing rivers of grace given to this little piece of Asgard. Only giving time and space for her mind to crawl back in time threads, golden threads, remembering the hidden jewels of Baldr in her heart...

\_"Ha-haha! Hiccup! Where on Frigga's braids are you taking us?" Her laughter barely allowed her to speak while being pulled by the hand of her lover down the stairs of her home and out the front door.\_

\_"You'll see." The only thing she got from him was that usually charming smile that showed his partly gaped central incisors as their movements increased in speed until they reached a very \_\_familiar Night Fury popping its head from the ground and smiling excitingly at the two of them. He immediately crouched. As if anxious of being mounted by Hiccup.\_



\_ "I see you're ready." Hiccup said as he let go of Astrid's hand and went over to Toothless, frantically beginning to rub the reptile's joyful head before dropping his hands from him and turning back to face the still confused lady standing just a few steps from them.\_

\_Hiccup took in a deep breath and stretched his hand out for her to hold. "Come with me? There's something I want to show you, Astrid."\_

\_Her lips were trapped in her teeth as she watched him. His face showed mischievousness and innocence at the same time. How could that even be? His eyes were impatient, almost pleading for her to hurry.\_

\_Not to keep him waiting much longer, a hand slowly rose from her sides and fingers were soon trailing up his own, until they were trapped in his palm and her body was gently pushed forward by that slightly annoying force that had always drawn her closer to him.\_

\_Knowing how an argument could grow in and ruin their moment just for him wanting to behave like a gentleman and offer her help climbing on Toothless, Hiccup let go of her hand and waited for her to climb herself up on the Night Fury. He wasn't willing to ruin his happy mood. Hiccup knew when to be a gentleman without upsetting her or making her feel as if she couldn't do things by herself.\_

\_It was...something like self-pride from Astrid's part.\_

\_Once she was on Toothless' back, Hiccup hooked his prosthetic foot in its specialized pedal and swung his other leg over the dragon, getting comfortable and rubbing on the Night Fury's sides  
"Ready?"\_

\_Toothless purred, hung his tongue out excitedly and as he turned his massive head to look at his rider, he nodded.\_

\_ "Hold up Hiccup! Where do yeh think yeh two are goin'?"\_

\_Hiccup allowed his entire body quiver at the sound of Stoick's voice. His cheerful expression shifted into a bummed, annoyed one as he closed his eyes and rolled his head, chuckling aloud, "Ahhg, Dad! What now!?"\_

\_By the time the eighteen year old boy opened his eyes and turned his head to the side, his father was already standing by them, both fists resting on his sides and eyebrows furrowed.\_

\_ "Yeh know I need you back at the forge, Hiccup."\_

\_ "I-I-I know that, dad, but I have to do something first  
Iâ€"\_"\_

\_ "With Astrid!?" Stoick's eyes snapped open in shock then frowned again at him, this time even angrier, "Son, I am certain yeh can control those kind of urges at this age."\_

\_Hiccup's cheeks flushed, his lips disappeared into his mouth, hands

gripped on the saddle and words seemed to be foreign for him all of the sudden.\_

\_"What are you talking about?" Astrid's hushed question came out as soft and easy as Hiccup wished his own voice would sound. But he knew better. He knew very well that if he dared to open his mouth for automatic defense, words wouldn't be the ones that would come out. Gags would...and the wrong kind.\_

\_"Hiccup said he was going to show me something. He'll be back quick, Stoick." Astrid said.\_

\_"Is that so? And where to may I know?"\_

\_"Astrid shrugged, "I don't know. He hasn't said."\_

\_"Dad," Finally, managing to take in a calmer deep breath and trying to find his dad's eyes, Hiccup added "It's a surprise. We've talked about it. Remember?"\_

\_"Suddenly, the sharp look on Hiccup's eyes made Stoick's pop back open. Fists dropped from his sides as he relaxed his shoulders and chewed on his lips. "Oh! Oh, yes! Yes, of course, son! Go right ahead!"\_

\_"Then, a guilty expression turned into an overly excited one adorned the chief's entire aura as he slightly swayed back and forward, clapping his hands and rubbing his palm against the other, "Go on, go on. Yeh don't want teh run outta time, son! Go, on! Wouldn't want teh ruin the moment, eh?! Go on, I'll cover up for yeh, hehehe,"\_

\_"Astrid's brow rose.\_

\_"What's with yourâ€"ah!"\_

\_"Toothless took off, having Astrid immediately take a painful grip on Hiccup's forearms. "Gah! Astrid! Would you please control your claws?"\_

\_"Sorry..." She muttered while trying to fix herself on a comfortable position and finally unhooked her fingernails from his forearm, sliding her arms along his sides and wrapped them tightly around his waist. Grinning up at him, "Better?"\_

\_"Hiccup sighed, shaking his head in relief that he still felt his skin. Thinking this could be another reason to finish that flight suit he'd been working on for months by now.\_

\_"Clouds were dark, threatening rain over them as they pierced the skies. There was nothing but darkness clouding daylight. "Hiccup?" Leaning against his back, rising her lips to his ear, whispering into them as her eyes focused forward, trying to find an unknown hope of clarity through their journey, "Are you sure about this?"\_

\_"I trust him." It was all he said.\_

\_"Astrid felt at unease. She trusted the dragon, as well. But since she didn't exactly know where they were headed, that usually annoying feeling of not being in control of the situation began growing and

grossing her out. She hated not to know what to expect. She wanted him to tell her at once, she demanded it!\_

\_But, knowing Hiccup, she would get no other answer than the famous 'be patient' one. And to be honest, when it came to Hiccup, the least she'd learned to be is patient.\_

\_Not many minutes later, the dark clouds had finally dispersed and light was welcomed back to their eyes. Hiccup's lips moved to the right in a small satisfactory smile as he felt how Astrid's hold on his waist loosened. Her hands slid to his back and rose to his shoulders as she held him still so she could use him as support while leaning to the side so she could take a better look at the tall island getting closer and bigger before them.\_

\_The trees were rich of stunning colors like dark orange to red, yellow, light greenish and darker greenish. Few pine trees, colorful flora and birds flying over the falls that descended from the tallest peaks. The grounds were dark greenish, more like shining emeralds, thanks to the sunlight that caressed them.\_

\_Clouds floated not over the island and they were certainly not dark. On all contraire, they were gracefully positioned around the island, and they were as white as wool.\_

\_"Surprise."\_

\_Astrid glanced back at Hiccup. Her lips dropped open in shock still. Toothless landed, Astrid hopped from the dragon first, and then Hiccup followed. He rubbed on Toothless' sides, thankful.\_

\_"When did you find this place?" She asked. \_

\_"Mm, about three days ago."\_

\_She paced, slowly, slower, very much in pause, studying everything around her. Not recalling nor giving much importance to when exactly did he disappear and flew away with Toothless without telling her.\_

\_"It's...wow." Speechless, she allowed her fingers dance on white flower petals belonging to vines as she walked.\_

\_"I still haven't named it." He said.\_

\_That, made her stop. Turning on her heels to face a Hiccup whose eyes wouldn't abandon her movements. "Why nâ€"\_"\_

\_Words were cut off from her lips as she noticed how he looked at her. Instead of not showing any emotion at all, or at least smile at her as he usually does, Hiccup's lips were slightly parted. Most of his weight on his good leg, arms dropped on his sides, eyes pierced into her far ones. They were...sad? Confused? Dumbfounded? Hurt?\_

\_She didn't know. And what was worse, Astrid couldn't find reasons that would justify any of those feelings.\_

\_"Are you alright, Hiccup?"\_

\_Hiccup's senses snapped back in time when he realized she was getting closer to him. He shook his head and gave her a small smile, "Uh yeah, sure, I'm fine, Astrid. Um, don't worry about me I was just...admiring on how you...uh, well your reactions. I was just, enjoying them."\_

\_Even though he started out nearly gagging his words, he finished his sentence with a warm feeling as she felt his hand find hers, "You know, I haven't mapped it yet either."\_

\_She blinked, surprised to hear that. Naturally, Hiccup would document as soon as he finds something new. But before she could even take a breath to say something in response, Hiccup took a hold of her other hand and leaned into her. A playful smirk invading his entire humor before whispering "Come with me."\_

\_Taking them to an orange tree near the edge of the cliff, Hiccup let go of her hands and crouched \_\_down to the ground, crawling towards the tree. He made himself comfortable with his back against that wide trunk, then beckoned for her to join.\_

\_Astrid smiled, not really helping kneeling down and crawling toward him, sitting right before him. Hiccup slid his right hand into his fur vest, pulling a folded paper from its inner pocket, unfolding it on the space of ground between them and flattened a hand on it to keep it still for a while until he slid his free hand into his boot and tried to pull out a charcoal pencil, when it slipped from his hand. Astrid slid her hand through his tangled arms and legs and found the pencil underneath his good leg's thigh. Laughing within, she offered it back to him.\_

\_Before accepting her help, Hiccup gave her a warm smile and shook his head, taking his hand back. "You do it."\_

\_Astrid blinked, once again in utter confusion and instead of saying something, she leaned down to the map and began tracing their surroundings, marking every detail her eyes captured as she made glances between the map and what her eyes could reach.\_

\_"Do...you...like it?" He asked. \_

\_"Mhm." She nodded, "Very much."\_

\_"What name should we give it?" His hand found the messy ends of her braid, and her eyes found his own.\_

\_"You...were waiting for me to choose a name?" She asked.\_

\_Hiccup nodded.\_

\_"Why?"\_

\_He chuckled, sheepishly smiling at her puzzled expressions, "Together we map the world, remember?"\_

\_No words could be found to answer that. For a brief moment, all of her vocabulary had vanished from her knowledge. All she could do, was nod once, leaning her face to the side, feeling his hand drop her braid just to open his palm to cup a rounded cheek.\_

\_"So? What's it going to be?" He asked.\_

\_She bit on her lips, moving her head away in order to glance at her surroundings one last time before looking back at him,  
"Baldr."\_

\_Hiccup tilted his head to the side, he knew she had more to say...she always does.\_

\_"This place, feels as if anyone could come in and breathe in light for the first possible time. Feed from it, so peaceful and seems unbearably pure."\_

\_Hiccup's smile widened, followed by a reassuring nod, "Then Baldr it is."\_

\_Astrid pompously shrunk her head into her shoulders. Handing him his pencil back, then watching how he saved the new Island's name in the map, slid the pencil back into his boot and then moved to fold the map and slid it back into his vest's inner pocket.\_

\_"Hiccup, look." His head bobbed back at her and caught her finger signaling at what seemed like Terrible Terrors flying in groups of three across the sun.\_

\_Startled by the sun's position, just a few inches from the horizon, his molars found their way to trap his inner cheeks in and chew on them.\_

\_"Um...Astrid?"\_

\_"Hm?" She didn't turn to look at him. Instead, she laid on her stomach, focusing her eyes in the Terrors' as they gradually vanished with the distance.\_

\_"Is there anything you'd like to have, like in a near time?" Troubles for forming his thoughts into correct and mostly coherent words, were evident. For his eyes shifted from her to the skies, from the skies to the ground, from the ground to her, so and so, as he talked.\_

\_"A knife made out of Stormfly's spikes."\_

\_â€œThat was a quick answerâ€œHe thought while bringing a hand to the back of his head, habitually scratching his scalp.

"Yeah...well..Um...you know, the yellow part secretes poison by beingâ€œ"\_"\_

\_"...Stimulated by touch." Astrid finished for him, glancing over her shoulder, giving him a sharp stare. "Yeah, I think I know my girl pretty well, Hiccup." Smiles, "That's the whole point in having one. That way the attack's effects are slow and the pain turns out to be double."\_

\_"Slow?!" Hiccup huffed, "A Nadder's poison gets to dry another dragon's heart in less than ten minutes. Imagine how fast it would be on a human." He then chuckled, shaking his head as he realized that this wasn't exactly the kind of conversation he wanted to have with her...at least not at the moment.\_

\_She shrugged, "Not sure, but I definitely would love to witness one."\_

\_He shuddered at the image forming in his head of a Deadly Nadder sending spine-shots at a human and how this one died poisoned. "I don't."\_

\_"Anyway," chuckles "That's not what I meant. What I meant was, if you wanted something special?" He said. \_

\_"A knife like that would be special." She teased, "It would be the best weapon in my collection." Her teeth showed to him, wide and innocent. She clearly didn't have a clue on what he was trying to get to.\_

\_"Is fighting and violence all you think of, Astrid?"\_

\_She laughed, especially at his suddenly dropped expression, "Of course not."\_

\_Her body moved, pushing herself back up to a sitting position, "I also have other things in mind, you know?"\_

\_"Oh, yeah? Like what \_\_\_for example?"\_

\_Astrid grinned, crawling to him, sitting right by him, her back against the tree trunk, left hand finding his right. Tracing little shapes on his knuckles. "You'll have to find out on your own."\_

\_Hiccup sighed, unsure on how to get even close to what he wanted to before running out of planned time. "I know what I want," he whispered, "Aside from riding Toothless all day long and train new dragons."\_

\_"What is?" She asked, mimicking his own low tone.\_

\_"Sharing my life with someone worthy of it."\_

\_Her chest tightened. Not daring to lift her sight and face him. Unable to even find words to spread. All she could do, was stay still, feeling his hand slightly shake beneath hers. "I know, I um...I might not be the best at most things in a Viking's life. I might still be trying to figure out what you could possibly like about being with me and what does dad and everyone else see in me. I am definitely not an expert on choosing the correct terms for a conversation, like Fishlegs. But, I've always been certain on what I wanted, when it came to having a girlfriend. Not, thinking of breaking up sooner or later. No, I always wanted to have someone I would be certain to hope for a future together." He took in a deep breath, then, as he let it go, he continued. "Before even having the chance of becoming a friend of yours, I had dreams and daydreams of being your hero."\_

\_At that final sentence, Hiccup laughed. Astrid chuckled at how his words sounded, "As if I ever needed a hero." She muttered, unable to just keep it to herself.\_

\_He innocently shrugged, "Well, I was five at that time! What would

you expect?"\_

\_"Pst, wimpy kid..." She teased.\_

\_Hiccup shook her hand, playfully. As if that would make her stop mocking him.\_

\_"Anyway! Astrid..." He barged the words in, though she kept laughing within.\_

\_Her laughter eased when she felt his other hand cup hers. Caressing her knuckles, tracing shapes over her carpal region, "Hiccup, just say it."\_

\_Now, his chest was the one that tightened. What was her hurry? Perhaps, she had grown tired of him circling around the subject and adding nonsense to what he was truly meaning to say. Though, her words didn't really surprise him. She was just being...herself. Astrid liked things at their truest point. No nonsense, no babble. In fact, the buzz usually annoyed her. But, Hiccup was far more afraid for her possible answer than on how angry she would get at him for not being clear enough. Few seconds later, his lungs received a long, strong dose of fresh oxygen and as he glanced up at the distant sunset, allowing the red skies distract his nerves and pull the words out as smooth as ever possible...\_

\_"Will you marry me?"\_

\_The words, felt much lighter than he'd expected. Hel, he thought it would feel as if vomiting iron! But none of that happened. After letting the kind of question he'd been longing to ask her ever since he realized how much he loved and wanted her near all the time, he felt incredibly light and at ease. Not even the wait for her unpredictable answer took away that gentle feeling that relaxed his heart, yet.\_

\_Moving his sight from the scarlet skies, finding her hiding eyes as she kept her head down, gazing at their still held hands, Astrid licked on her lips before slowly moving her head up to finally look at him. Just to find a pair of emerald eyes mercilessly stabbing into her own. Her \_\_other hand trailing up his arm, reaching his acromion, lightly gripping on it as their heads slowly leaned into each other. Eyelids threatening to drape their eyes. The very last rays of sunlight stinging against their cheeks, but making them look like a portrait marked by the very gods watching them from Asgard as lips finally gave into each other and sealed that little space that parted their bodies from one another.\_

\_Light didn't sting anymore, now, it felt warm and pleasant against their faces, until it was soon replaced by a gentle kiss from the wind and a darker shade in the skies.\_

\_Her hand on his acromion pulled him closer while her lips trapped his lowest one, moistening the dried skin in them. His own moved to keep hers steady against them, but she wouldn't obey. Her teeth found the soft skin of his lowest lip and caged it for a few short seconds, then let it go, making up for the bite with a tenderer kiss.\_

\_He might be right. Hiccup wasn't the best at planning special events or even put them into a perfect practice. But the secret? That was

what Astrid loved most about him, that no matter his plans, their moments together had always meant to turn out special, even if they were training or cleaning the stables. What had truly mattered the most to her, was the time she spent with him. Away from other kinds of troubles, just he and she, sharing humble moments in unison.\_

\_The kiss increased, turning from tender, to passionately loving. Having Hiccup guess, what her answer was truly meant to be.\_

## 9. Never Surrender

"Shh... Steady girl. Not another sound." Astrid's voice was merely audible, but enough for a dragon to hear her as she stood still on her back, stretched an arm to the frames and took a safe hold on them before stretching a leg and steadying her foot on the window frame, she then pushed herself in and with an agile move, in less than expected, she was finally \_in\_ his room.

Everything was dark. Of course, everyone must be asleep. It's nearly past three in the morning. Toothless was curled up in his usual corner a little further from Hiccup's bed.

Astrid allowed the moonlight guide her steps further into the room as she tiptoed to his bed, lifting the fur covers and sliding in, laying by his side. As she pushed herself over him, her movements might have alarmed his deep slumber as his eyes cracked open and his hand took a grip on her arm.

"It's okay...it's just \_me\_." She whispered.

Hiccup's hold relaxed, as much as his body before using his other arm to wrap it around her waist and take the newly usual initiative of pulling her close against him. "What brings you here?"

She shrugged, "Just, passing by."

He smiled, not really helping it and kissed on her shoulder before cuddling her even closer, closing his eyes once more. "I'm glad you're here, though. I haven't seen you all day."

"You're used to not seeing me."

His eyes shot back open, just to pout at her, "That's not entirely true, you know." He sighs "Those two months without you weren't exactly \_without\_ you. I um...well...I...erm...I sometimes snuck into your room and stayed awhile, watching you sleep."

"Really?"

"Mhm, but you know..." He tapped his fingers on her arm, "...My mom is right downstairs and you perfectly know how you're \_not\_ supposed to be in a man's bed while unmarried."

Astrid frowned, tracing shapes on his supraclavicular. "I know." Shrugging, "...But it's not really the \_first\_ time."

That seemed to have stopped him from making up more excuses to make her leave his bed. Astrid took this chance to grip on his tunic and



crash her lips against his own. Not giving him any chance to resist as she immediately poked her tongue on his lips. He gave in "as usual" to her. Parting his lips and allowing exclusive access to her before attacking her tongue with his own as a response.

Her hand let go of his tunic and slid slowly up to his neck, holding him still so he wouldn't pull away from their now well grown passionate kiss.

His arm remained strong around her waist, equally holding her tightly close to his body so she wouldn't change her mind and unglue herself from him at once so soon. Meanwhile, his other hand began lowering on her skin from her shoulder, down her arm, parting contact with her to just land on her hip, carefully skip the spikes of her skirt and finally, possessing her thigh.

It had taken him long enough to just let go and learn how to take initiatives with his girl. Yet, he never denied that the original fear of touching her and ending up completely soulless in return, still existed. Without it, he wouldn't even have the chance of getting to know what she likes, what she doesn't, how she likes to be treated...so and so.

Their kiss was broken no-thanks-to-her when she pulled back just enough to leave a thin trail of saliva on his cheek as she gently kissed it and then brushed her lips back down his neck, stopping there to begin nibbling on that burning skin of his.

Inner growls emerged from him. The leg he had been touching all along, moved over his thigh and tangled itself with it. Soon, his hand rose from her thigh, up her hip, her sides, arm and finally reaching that golden braid hanging over her shoulder, ends tickling on the skin of his limitedly exposed chest.

His fingers found the band keeping her braid tight together and gently pulled from it. Letting the dark band fall somewhere on him, getting lost in the bed thanks to their unsteady little chest-on-chest-movements.

Fingertips found their way through her braids, as he moved his hand down and gracefully undid them.

The feeling of his hand digging into her now loose curls made her sigh against his neck. Her teeth threatening to rip that tender spot apart and taste his scarlet juices, just like a hungry beast.

Her hand fell from his jawline and landed on his chest, sliding down to find the hem of his tunic and bringing it back up, finally pulling away from him and using both hands to remove it.

Hiccup rose himself just enough for her to slide it over his head and toss it away, letting it fall lost within the unforgiving darkness.

Instead of bringing herself back down to him, or letting him pull her closer, Astrid moved to straddle on his lap and lifted herself just enough for her hands to work on the belts of his trousers and loose them up as she bit on her lower lip, removed her hands from his trousers, resting them on his navel and pressing her throbbing forbidden region against his now hardening one.

Hiccup moved to sit beneath her. His limbs ached with desire, his heart pounded with the urges and he could feel the blood boiling all over his face in response to what was awakening down between their legs.

An arm snaked around her back, the other cupped her neck and brought her into a desperate kiss. Just so she could know what her teasing was doing to his body.

Tonguing one another, the fingers he rested on the lowest of her back, searched for the hem of her shirt. Loosening it from her skirt before pulling his chest back enough not to break their passionate ravaging, but to trip his fingers up to disengage the locks of her furred hood and letting it fall from her back, followed by a quick unlock of her shoulder pads and finally lifting her shirt up her breasts.

Their mouths parted from each other so he could slide her shirt over her head and let it fall from his hold somewhere on the bed, behind her. She immediately pushed him back down and licked on his lips before he'd hold her tight enough to catch her off guard and roll them both on the bed, having them switch positions.

Now he was the one laying over her. His lips sunk into her neck, using his nose to push away every strand of hair that might stop him from taking a full taste of her skin as he licked his way down her collarbone, nibbling gently on it while rising his lower half from her and bringing his hand down her breast bands, all the way to her stomach, and then reached right beneath her skirt.

Pulling her leggings down her thigh after moving apart just enough to glance at her currently unknown expressionsâ€”dammed darknessâ€”

Hiccup worked both hands to slide the leggings completely down her legs and let her kick them off herself before bringing himself back down on her and letting her roll them over once again.

Now, laying on the same position they had started, with her on his side, Astrid's hand touched on the cool of his chest, down his stomach and to his forbidden fruit. His hands began to shake on her skin, revealing how he was starting to feel at unease. She leaned to kiss him once again, this time with unbelievable tenderness as he began relaxing his body beneath her and willed for her to do as she pleased.

Although her hand also began to slightly tremble once it made contact with an unusual throbbing rock, his throat released a soft groan at the sudden feeling of her slowly rubbing over his trousers.

The arousal was just too much for him. From having her tight bindings brush against his bare chest, to her hand rhythmically pleasing him over the thin layers that remained on him. Hips soon began to respond to the movements of her hand.

She broke their kiss to lick her way up his cheekbones and straight back to his earlobe. Releasing low sighs once she moved her hips over his own, just enough to pull his already well lubricated stranger out from his trousers, to meet her pleading opening.

Sighs became a little louder to his ears as she moved her hand still in rhythm with his hip movements against her inner thighs when he opened his already dizzy eyes and brought his lips up her jawline, leaving small kisses on her cheeks, releasing soft growls in between before then allowing cracking whispers escape from his chapped lips, "Shh...My mom...can...hear...us."

She grinned, moving her face to meet his as she felt his hand slightly pulling from her scalp, not to let her pull so far from him "Since \_when\_ do I let dangerous matters stop me?"

Hiccup looked up at her, unsure on what to say except for coming up with a wave of objections and protests. But the pleasure was consuming him much faster than worry itself. Not even the fact that Toothless was sleeping in the \_same\_ \_room\_ had stopped them from getting this far.

Then, it rushed to his neurons. The feeling of not being able to hold back, that it might be troublesome for both of them if he didn't push her away from him and finish the job on his own. "Astrid...stop...I...A...As...Astrid...move away..."

But, as stubborn and daring as she usually is, instead of following advice—or orders—her hand moved even faster and rougher on him. Surely, her hips fell from his own and laid right by his side, but that didn't stop her from increasing her controls on him until all of the blood in his body seemed to have rushed to just one place.

Eyes rolling back, lips parting and allowing heavy sighs escape from them as thick juices were finally excreted, spreading all over her hand and so little on his navel.

His breathings deepened as all of his muscles suddenly relaxed.

Eyes shot back open when he felt her hand groping one last time on him, squeezing all juices left of him and bringing her filled hand straight to the aching point between her legs. Dipping her fingers in, letting the smooth excretions of his body be the ones that marked her own.

"W-what are you doing?" He asked, blinking up at her in shock,

"Feeling you."

"A-A-...no... You...I mean...that's..." He gagged, not really knowing how to respond to that. Hiccup brought himself back up, supporting his weight on his elbows "But...what if \_something\_ goes wrong?"

"So what? We'll be \_married\_ in the morning, anyway."

Then, a sudden brush of thick slime bathed his face, breaking back up from his unusual slumber. His eyes snapped open just to find Toothless' head over him, tongue hanging out from his mouth and gums playfully showing in that usually \_good-morning-smile\_ of his.

Hiccup brought a hand to his eyes, rubbing the moisture from his eyelids and then palming on his forehead in recognition as he stared

up at the ceiling, "It was...just \_a dream\_..."

Toothless tilted his head to the side, as if wondering on what his rider was mumbling about. Clearly, what had happened in Hiccup's dream apparently also stayed in that Realm. Otherwise, the dragon would be mocking him with weird faces from the very start.

Hiccup chuckled at him and gently pushed his head away, smiling, "Never mind. Trust me, you \_don't\_ wanna know."

Toothless shrugged and turned away, heading down the stairs.

Hiccup took in a deep breath, as if believing one was enough to calm his quivering body down. He needed \_more\_ than just a deep breath. Hells, he needed to be able to stay alone for a while longer so he would \_make sure\_ there were no embarrassing traces of his newly interrupted slumber.

Truth was, it wasn't the very first time he had one of those...

He'd been dreaming of her and their souls merging into one equal ever since puberty hit on him. Now, it wasn't just a matter of an already passed puberty session...no, it was more like a need to have her every single evening. Resting legally by his side and waking to her priceless smiles the morning after.

Yet, he still knew that this kind of secret, which lied in his room and had never fled from it nor reached the ears of his one desired Valkyrie, had to stay as just \_that\_...a completely sealed secret. Keeping it just between silence, and himself.

But, how'd he confirm this was all just a pleasant dream? Simple...she never showed up after he last saw her hopping on Stormfly's back and disappearing into the clouds. She had warned him she wasn't sure of her returning hour, and she wasn't fooling around when she did.

Hiccup sighed, his heart sunk into that awfully familiar feeling of missing her once again. That same sinking it was in during two months straight, right after he was named chief. But, he \_knew\_ this time, it was very much \_necessary\_. He had to continue his search for something that could relieve them from an unnecessary war, and most, from an eternal farewell to his lady.

Turning on his side, sitting himself on the bed before standing straight up and stretching his limbs, Hiccup drew in another deep breath, grabbed his flight suit and began buckling it on while staring out his window. Glad he chose that very night to sleep trouser-less, otherwise, proof on what had happened within his slumber was to be far more evident than needed.

Finding himself thinking not of the village's status, his visitors, nor what he was to do during the day...he was thinking of her.

"Where did you sleep last night, Astrid?"

"Warm, in my girl's wings."

Hiccup's body turned, to find a beautiful, smiling blonde warrior

leaning against the frames of his entrance. His lips traced a small, but meaningful smile and before he could say something else, she dropped her sight from his own, "It would be wrong of me going back home when I so selfishly left."

"But, did you stay outdoors?" He asked. Wait, exactly how long has she been standing there?

She shook her head and started walking towards him. When she reached him, she began helping him buckle his suit. "Where we slept the other night with the gang."

"\_Our\_ \_house\_." He corrected.

Her smile faded away, having him feel slightly distressed by that sudden reaction. Then she nodded. "Right..."

His hands found her sides, resting over her belt, "I thought I wouldn't see you today."

"I have duties to fulfill." She answered with a sweet smile before pulling once more from the last buckle to tighten it and then pulled her hands back. "I was actually on my way to the docks when I saw your mom coming out the front door. I asked her if you were still home and she let me in."

At the length of Hiccup's silence, she added "Thought it might be good to walk with you to the shop."

He swallowed, with a little difficulty, "Um...That...uh...Astrid, I won't be at the blacksmith shop today."

She blinked back up at him, tilting her head to the side "Where then?"

Hiccup brought a hand to the back of his head and scratched it while slightly shifting his shoulders out of habit, "The um-Great Hall?"

"Again?" She pouted. "Hiccup what are you up to?"

He chuckled, looking down at her with exhaustion, "Don't ask, Astrid. Please. I \_can't\_ answer that right now."

"Okay, alright, fine. I won't ask." She shrunk her shoulders and looked away, slightly snorting.

His lips drew a half smile as he rose a hand from her hips and touched the softness of her cheek.

Leaning to his touch, Astrid's eyes found his own and mimicked that little smile he was gifting her as he whispered, "I would very much appreciate you walking with me, though. That way, you can tell me how your day was, yesterday on the way."

And so they did. With the gentlest caress from the breeze on their skin, revealing how closer they got to a chiller season, Hiccup and Astrid walked together. Minding far too little of what thoughts circled within the merciless heads of others as they witnessed their two youngest leaders walk together.

She showed thrill, an amount of happiness that nearly felt foreign to all of those that in that very morning had spotted them strolling down the stoned roads.

\* \* \*

><p>"Oi, may I please be reminded on what we are lookin' for, eh?" Gobber asked. Burying his prosthetic-hook hand into a chest full of long-forgotten treasures.<p>

"This is useless, Hiccup." Fishlegs protested, sitting on a closed vault, dropping his shoulders relaxed and clearly ignoring Gobber's question, "We have been searching since yesterday and still, \_nothing\_."

"We can't give up. We still have some time left." Hiccup said, quickly eyeing an old scripture in his hand. When he didn't find anything of use, he shook his head, rolled the scripture closed, let it fall into the vault he was searching in, and grabbed another one. Repeating the same thing over and over.

"I must be at the docks preparing everything for tomorrow." Mulch said from the other side of the cavern, holding a torch up high to bring them some more light. "No ship can leave without its provisions ready."

"No ship will abandon this island." Hiccup said, still giving his back to the rest, his brows furrowed as he intended to focus on his quick readings "No one gets in and no one leaves until I have what I want in my hands."

"And, what exactly are yeh...I mean, \_we\_ lookin' for eh Hiccup?" Gobber asked, this time leaning to the young chief as he slowly stepped closer.

"I told you. Proof. An old law or \_something\_ that can relieve Astrid from this absurd arrangement."

"Yes, and I suppose you'll miss on tonight's feast, right?" Bucket asked, glancing every now and then at his young chief while brusquely moving his hand side to side into the vault before him, making some rolls fly out of it.

"No, Bucket," This time, Hiccup finally straightened himself and glanced over his shoulder at Bucket. His eyes determined, "I \_have\_ to be there."

"Ah, glad ta know yeh are takin' responsibility on yer duties eh Hiccup!" Gobber proudly said as he patted on Hiccup's back with the sides of his hookâ€"not really \_that\_ gentleâ€"making the boy gag at the sudden thud on his poorly muscular back.

"Well actually, Gobber, I won't go to the feast because I have to show how annoyingly responsible I should be." His lips spread his very own mischievous smirkâ€"which showed up whenever he planned on getting away with things his own wayâ€"

"And \_why\_ ye're goin' then?" Gobber asked.

Hiccup wagged his arms and shoulders, "Because I have other things in mind."

Fishlegs blinked, confounded as well, Gobber's mouth opened in signs of being on the verge of saying something when Hiccup turned his back on them once again and continued digging into the old rolls inside the vault before him. "Keep on searching, we have to find something that would get Astrid out of trouble before she is forced to leave."

Gobber sighed, gave the boy one last hopeless look and then turned around, walking to a closed, big, dark purple vault at the end of the cave. Dusting it with his good hand before then cracking it open. Digging into a search he knew very well that it was to be completely worthless.

But Hiccup thought, no. He believed otherwise. He trusted deep down in his heart and soul that there was another way. That there was a way they could all respect their laws of lacing-the-knot without causing further disaster in their lands.

He couldn't tell the others his true reasons of assisting the feast. Was he even willing to tell them his true reasons where to enjoy the evening with her?

That was firstly none of their concern and as second, it wasn't exactly like him to spill out his intimate thoughts.

Last night's dream had hit the last nerve. Why did Thor make him have a dream like that at a moment like this?! Were the gods out of their bloody mind?! To top it off, Astrid mystically appeared in his room that morning. Gladly, she didn't notice his calming point within his pants. And if she did, then damn was she good at hiding things.

Yet, that was the last time he'd seen her. In all day, after being accompanied to the doors of the Great Hall, Hiccup jailed himself undergrounds while she was out there doing only-Odin-knows-what. He wanted to see her again, to cherish a few more hours with her, to believe those weren't the last hours feasting with her presence near his own, and to power up the desires of searching for a solution to their problems until drained.

Hours were spent trying to find something useful in the old-hidden rooms of the Great Hall. Hiccup had led Bucket, Mulch, Gobber, Snotlout and Fishlegs through the tunnels where the Whispering Death that once threatened their village left behind. Then, they found themselves within the abandoned caverns of Berk, where nearly all treaties and laws had been kept secure and isolated from thieves and traitors.

Dad...I know you would have an answer to all of this. I know you'd find what I am looking for far faster than what I could. If only, you'd be here right now.â€”He thought, his brows frowning with anger and frustration all mixed up in one single feeling as he searched and read, searched and read, searched and read.

\* \* \*

><p>"Hey guys," Astrid said while walking down the ramps into the

Academy, coming to find just Ruffnut's foot on Tuffnut's face, on the ground. "Have you seen Hiccup? I've been looking for him all day long. Its nearly sundown and <em>what</em> in the world are you two doing?" Her feet came to a halt, tilting her head to the side and resting her right knuckles on her hip as she watched the twins.

"Twin secret." Tuffnut said, Astrid had to raise a brow as she delayed a little in understanding his words since his mouth was nearly against the ground, having his voice sound completely off.

Ruffnut grinned at her brother and moved her foot from his face, "Have you tried his house?"

"Not yet." Astrid said, "His house is the last place I'd look for."

"Why? Doesn't he live there?" Tuffnut asked as he stood back up, rubbing his jaw.

"Yeah, but him being chief, he barely stays at home." Astrid shrugged.

"True." Tuffnut mumbled.

Astrid shrugged, "Anyway, thanks for nothing." With this, she turned on her heel and walked back out of the arena, shaking her head, thinking that it wasâ€"just as usualâ€"a waste of time to even bother asking the twins for something.

"You're welcome!" Ruffnut answered all cheerful, waving back at the female Viking getting further by the minute.

"What did we do?" Tuffnut asked, looking at his sister with a vaguely dropped mouth.

Ruffnut shrugged, "I have no idea. Hey, wanna play a game?"

"What game?"

"Punch the brainless."

"Punch the what? And how do you play it anyway?" Tuffnut asked.

"We determine who punches harder."

"Oh, right. Cool. Then, me first!" Tuffnut said, drawing his hand back, but before even getting a chance to taking in his usual breath of force and strength, a hard smack on his head brought him to the cold grounds once again.

When his eyes found his sister once again, he saw her smirking down at him, holding a shield in both hands. "I win."

"Gaah, I want a rematch!"

\* \* \*



><p>"Toothless?"<p>

The black dragon killed his movements and dropped the few logs of wood in his mouth to the ground at the shock of seeing Astrid stand just a few feet before him. The logs rolled down to her feet. She kneeled and picked them up. "What are you doing? Where is Hiccup?"

"He is helping me," Out of nowhere, Valka suddenly appeared right before her and took the logs from her. "Hiccup is still doing his usual."

Astrid frowned, "His usual? What exactly do you mean by his \_usual\_?"

Valka tried to control her deceitful spreads, but little fake smiles still escaped her trembling lips, "You know. Building up saddles, resolving issues, whatnot. Now, if you'll excuse me dear, I have to get back to my do's."

"Need any help with those?" Astrid pointed at the log being grasped by Toothless' teeth and those still on the ground.

"Oh no!" Valka barked, catching Astrid aback. Since \_when\_ does Valka speak and react like that?

"I mean, I am fine, dear Astrid. I have Toothless and Cloudjumper with me."

Astrid crossed her arms over her chest, pouting in skepticism "And I suppose \_Stormfly\_ too, right?"

"Whaâ€"oh!" When Valka turned around, she found a familiar Deadly Nadder regurgitating a load of fish before the Night Fury, who dropped the log aside, showed her his gums in enthusiasm and then leant down to Vacuum the food right in. "Oh my..."

Astrid made a disgust expression as she watched the dragons, "May I ask \_what\_ are you doing?"

She demanded to know what was going on. Why everyone she was looking for suddenly disappeared? Where had Hiccup been all day long?

He couldn't be flying off mapping because Toothless was right before her eyes. And why were Stormfly and Toothless helping \_Valka\_ with who knows what? Wait, what are they even trying so hard to hide from her, anyway? Something was upâ€"she was \_sure\_ of it.

"Just, some remodeling, dear."

\_Remodeling my axe...â€"\_Astrid thought, still frowning, clearly finding it hard to believe what she was hearing.

Suddenly, her thoughts changed to how she didn't have the time to stay and find out what was going on. She would, \_eventually\_. Even if she had to persuade someone into spilling the stew out.

Her shoulders relaxed and so did her face as she closed her eyes and let out a long, silent breath. When her eyes opened once again, to look back at Hiccup's mother, they reflected nothing but

exhaustion.

"You needed something, Astrid?" Valka asked.

She shook her head, "Nothing. I just wanted to see if Hiccup was at home, that's all."

"Oh. Well, as you can see, he isn't."

Astrid nodded, "Mhm." Then chuckled, "When you see him, would you please tell him I won't go to the feast? Just so he wouldn't stay waiting like last time."

Valka's eyes widened, "Why not go? I mean, you have to."

"No I don't. And I won't."

Valka sighed, this time, the caring and concerned Valka Astrid had come to know had showed herself back to her with those greenish, motherly worried eyes of hers that reminded her so much of Hiccup. "If it is for not wanting to face Billus and Osch, then you won't have to. You've always ignored them so far at the table, why this night be any different?"

"Because I wish to be alone, that's why."

Valka chuckled, "Tonight, you'll get everything you desire, except for being alone, my dear."

Astrid's head dropped, her eyes to the ground, her teeth mutilating her lips in anger, nearly tasting her own blood as her nails dug into her palms, "Not everything..."

\* \* \*

><p>"My dear lady Astrid! What a wonderful surprise!" Astrid glanced over her shoulder to find Billus approaching her with a little, sad purple flower in his left hand.<p>

Rolling her eyes, she turned back to keep rubbing on Stormfly's scales. The nudge in her stomach tightened at the ways he addressed to her. Who did he thought he was to call her that way?

Her rate of annoyance shot to the last nerve when the young man violated her most treasured personal boundaries once his hand pushed forward, over her shoulder as the flower was held nearly to her nose. She flinched and stepped to the sideâ€"a little further and she'd bump against him. But Astrid knew better than to give him the pleasure of staying a single feet close to him.

"I'm not the flower kind." Her dry, humorless voice made it clear to everyone in the arena on how much of a mood she wasn't in.

"We will have to fix that soon, eh? Besides, these are purple Othils. They only bloom on strange occasions."

"They could be singing roses and I would still care less." She snarled and tightened Stormfly's saddle. "Now flee from my sight, would you?"

"Oh, not a chance my dear, because from tomorrow onwards, you will be entirely mine and must we get used to being close to each other, don't we?"

"Technically, saying something like that would cause those to be the last words he'd say...ever!" Ruffnut mumbled to her brother, grinning while cleaning her nails, not really wanting to miss on anything.

"Or, win you a ticket to the river of death." Tuffnut completed, having his sister roll her eyes since what she had previously said basically meant the same thing. Then, he eagerly glanced back at his sister, "Can we go there someday?"

"Rubbish! As my future lady, she is to set in for what I say and desire." Billus said.

Astrid snorted, "It hasn't been decided, yet."

"Oh, but it will, love. It will. Because you don't even have a choice."

"Call me that one more time and your eyes will become Dragon Snacks. Just so you know, Stormfly hasn't fed yet."

"That beast!?" Billus pointed at an already annoyed Blue Nadder, "You will keep that inferno's creature away from my sight as soon as possible! I do not wish for it to destroy the confidence of my people."

The Viking grinned, turning to finally face him and crossing her arms over her chest, "Well, your people might have to get used to this inferno's creature's presence since they will get lots of it soon enough."

"What do you mean by that?" Billus asked,

"What I mean," Astrid turned back to Stormfly, climbed on the stirrup and swung herself onto her dragon's back, "...is that wherever she goes, I go. Wherever she stays, I stay."

Not giving anyone else a chance or rights of further speech, Stormfly's wings spread wide open and her feet elevated from the ground as she beamed out of the arena and out of sight. Leaving every Viking in the perimeter astounded by the image of an impossibly fast Deadly Nadder and an angry Billus with steaming curled-up lips and brows, tight fists and gritted teeth.

"She's not that easy, man." Tuffnut said, shaking his head back and forth.

"She will be mine anyway." Billus muttered in response.

\* \* \*

><p>"I don't want to hear it, Eret. The least I want right now is to be bugged by your presence."<p>

"My means are not to burden you more than what damage has caused already. But there is something I must share with you, before

tonight's feast." Eret said.

"The only thing we are sharing, is the air we breathe and it still feels repulsive to me." Astrid muttered.

Eret's hand found her arm, having her hiss at the touch and yank her limb back from his daring touch, "Do not touch me."

"Fine, I won't."

Astrid glanced back at him, over her shoulder. Her eyes plain and straight at him, lips curled in what seemed like a threat to pout, but no words were spread. Then, she turned her attention back to the dragon and continued scrubbing her scales.

"You have spent all day rubbing and spoiling her." He commented.

Shrugging, "So?"

Eret shrunk his head into his shoulders and turned to walk further to the edge of the cliff they had found themselves at after Astrid flew out of the Academy with Stormfly. "Nothing. I imagine you'd want to spend time with your dragon before something else takes away your time from her and whatnot."

"Nothing will make me renounce to my affections towards my dragon."

"Even if you're obligated by one?" This time, the seemingly curious new rider turned to face her, but she was still giving her back to him. It was clear, her interest was intensely in the blue spiky reptile purring under her touch. Little did Astrid want to be found near the man that had brought so much misunderstanding all around the Village.

Though he only saw her back, the tone in her voice made him assume she was grinning, "No one obliges me to do anything." Then, her head moved, turning over her shoulder, her eyes finding his shape, long feet from her "I can see you still need lots to learn about the Hoffersons." Her head then turned back to the dragon, rubbing her much more frantically, enjoying the joyful purrs released from her one and only blue confident.

Silence took over their strange atmosphere. Even though Eret's sudden company didn't bother her as much as she'd hope it would, being accompanied on day three wasn't exactly within her plans. She wanted to be alone. Having Stormfly be her only exception.

Not even Hiccup. Well, she did hope to see him throughout the day. But in all reality, she didn't really feel like seeing him at the moment. Not after Billus presented himself to her and reminded her how miserable she was now destined to be.

Seeing how Hiccup ran and disappeared behind closed doors in the early morning and then have no sign of him until the least expected moment, made her believe his mysterious behavior needed some of her little-curious-approach. But as she intended to move her legs and secretly follow him and find out by herself what was he up to, Astrid came to the conclusion she was drained enough not to give it much

care.

Odd, right? To everyone else, it was strange to see how she expressed the usual good mornings to every Viking in her way and then disappear into the clouds or shadows of the trees in the past two daysâ€”including this oneâ€”and not know anything from her until sundown or the next day.

This time, she had decided to stay in grounds, just in case any emergency demanded her assistance. But she had taken every toy she would think of for Stormfly to play with, stocked them in an old bag and fled past the bridge that led to the insides of The Old Forest.

Hoping no one would locate her for long hours, claim her presence or even notice her absence while enjoying a solo time with Stormfly. When Eret just had to ruin her plans and reach up to her.

At first, she felt offended, as if someone had invaded her previous privacy. Wanting to bark out at him and order his return to town and just let her be. But then, the thoughts of what would happen in their near future overtook her senses and made her retreat from her wish of strangling the man to death not just for spoiling her alone-time-desire, but also because she hadn't forgotten his little slip on her, back at the wilderness.

Hel, she would never forget nor forgive him for spying and on top of all, lie to her. If he thought she would, then eventually she'd feel pity for his poor sense of ingenuity.

When her breath of calm was finally recovered, words slipped all by themselves from her dry, mistreated lips "What you wanted to tell me, is it of that much importance?"

"Aye." Words in sighs as his bum touched the ground. Legs crossed, thigh over ankle.

Though she expected a quick continuance, nothing but silence embraced all three of them. With his back held straight and still by an invisible barrier behind him, Eret's eyes got deeply lost in the ocean and the horizon that followed.

Not more than half a minute passed, before his lips parted, setting free long-abandoned feelings and memories from the dark cages of his heart "My father, was a great leader, back in my own land. He had four sons, all from different women. I, was the eldest of all four of them. When I was thirteen years old, or so, I was sent by him out on swords practice, deep into the woods. As I did what I was told, I never realized how much I had taken from the days' time in what I enjoyed doing the most. I loved how that sword slashed through the fine wood before me, how shiny it got after cleaned, how great it felt in my palm." His lungs released a loud sigh "Anyway, when I finally decided to return, I heard this yelling and tossing from one of the houses near the river. This man, was yelling at his wife. As I curiously sneaked over and looked through the window, I saw how he spat on the food before him and hurled the roasted chicken on her breasts, then threw the rest on the floor and ordered her to clean it."

How he faintly narrated the story, had caught her attention as she

was already slowly turning her entire body to face his backside. Hands falling from Stormfly's scales.

Knowing how \_most\_ men were like with their wivesâ€”in this eraâ€”it was the way Eret expressed those memories, all hollowed and as if within those words, existed a long trail leading toward a deeply forgotten yet meaningful scar.

Her legs brought her to stand just five feet from that man sitting on the ground. Standing there, suddenly petrified by the image growing in her head, reviving her own version of what he was saying in her thoughts. Her lips parted, releasing soft, breaking curious whispers and allowing the breeze caress her skin and play with her bangs. "What happened then?"

Eret snickered in silence, his gaze still firm to the horizon. As if that would keep him from recovering his manly pride and limit his words-spread. "She kneeled before him, chicken strips falling from her breasts and to the floor. When she was nearly finished picking the meat from the floor, the man took a grip on her braid and pulled her back up to nearly his level, drew the braid to the side and she lost her balance to the pain on his grip tugging from her head, so she tripped on her own feet and fell on her side over the table. The candles fell and their wax burned her arm. Then, I heard her mumble on how different her life would have been if she had married one she named something like Marnurn. He must have heard her, since he immediately growled in ire, pushed her hips to the side so she would be on her back, grabbed her neck and brought her a little to him, strangling her. He yelled something like '\_war would have been for your reckless doing then\_.' After that, he ripped her dress apart and..."

Eret didn't finish. He lowered his head to the ground and chewed on his inner cheeks, as if that would alleviate the irritation beginning to annoy his soul at the clear memory caving in his mind.

But Astrid was far from careless at the moment, so she pushed the words "And \_what\_?"

Eret sighed aloud, bringing his head back up, this time intending to shower his sight with the skies above, "He violated her."

An unconscious step back and a grip on her lower stomach by her left hand, made it clear to both of them the image succeeded its way into her thoughts. But then she shook it off almost immediately, frowning back at him, "And what does \_that\_ have anything to do with \_me\_?"

"Not you, \_me\_." He corrected. "Those were the parents of a young girl I was in love with. She was their only child. Just because her mother couldn't bare more children. They would just die in her womb right before the fourth month of growth. She had explained to me how that had been one of the reasons why her father wasn't as caring nor loving with her mother as he once was. He wanted progenies. Lots of em'. Just to make sure at least \_one\_ of his children would make up for a great leader one day and build a strong and promising alliance between tribes."

"They had their daughter." Astrid said. "Wasn't she enough?"

Eret shook his head, "To him, women were like worms. Slow, useless and unfaithful. He didn't trust this one child whom he always thought wasn't even his own until he saw her born. He wanted \_sons\_, men that would populate anywhere and timelessly."

The sudden flavor of disgust flourishing in her mouth made her frown. Licking on her lips until she heard him continue his story, "This beauty of my dreams, had told me how harsh her father might be. But she never said \_how\_ \_far\_ he would get if angry. Once I witnessed all he had done to his wife, I ran in search for her. To ask her to marry me as soon as possible just so I would get her out of that inferno of a house she lived in. But when I reached the lights that illuminated the center of our village, my father's hand halted me by my shoulder and said he had something to tell me. When I asked what it was, he said he had chosen a date of marriage to fulfill a recent contract with the lady chief of a closer tribe. I refused, of course. But then I was threatened. If my answer was a fair negative, then I would have to face execution for treason."

"Your own father would allow that?"

Eret nodded, "That, and \_more\_." He chuckled, gazing now at the bright and red sun setting on the thin horizontal line that parted the skies from the wide ocean. "You see, brave Astrid, when you love someone, the \_least\_ that crosses your head is share a life with someone \_else\_."

"You feel as if betraying your own heart..." She muttered, more to herself as she gazed at the sun as well. The frosty breeze making her pale nose soon turn a little pink, as did her lips and fingertips. But little did she feel the cold, for her mind was elsewhere. Far too busy to think of upcoming blizzards.

She knew very well she spoke of experience. The alliance wasn't what made her feel so angry about her marriage with Billus. It was how she felt she was betraying her heart, which had belonged to another man ever since she had conscience of what care and love was. She didn't want to hurt Hiccup. She was willing to do everything in order to have the power to stop herself from getting on that boat and sailing away from her home, away from everything she knew and cherished, until only Odin knows when.

Eret agreed, "My father never loved my mother. It was an arranged marriage just like what I was meant to have. What \_you\_ are forced to have. He wouldn't have cared for my opinion when all he desired was to have good protection."

"What-what happened to the girl?" A low, concerned voice caught both Astrid and Eret's attention as they snapped their heads back to see Ruffnut, standing just a few feet from Astrid. Her eyes worried and somewhat hurt. Hands empty and wide open by her sides. Head tilted to the side, focusing her sight straight at the sitting man on the edge of their cliff.

Had she been listening all along? How much had she heard?

Wait, was she spying on them, \_again\_?!

The mood for being angry at her for eavesdroppingâ€"againâ€"didn't exist. There was only room for curiosity and nostalgia. Perhaps, a

little of fear for upcoming days as well. But it had been minor compared to how curious both women were to hear how Eret's story ended.

Eret turned to focus back on the view, seemingly uncaring for this new intrusion and conformation of constant stalking from the female twin. "That night I wasn't thinking right. I waited for everyone to be asleep and sneaked into her house, asked her to run off together and build our own untroubled destiny. We did. We found an abandoned cabin within the depths of the forest and decided to spend the night there. The next morning, she was nowhere to be found when my father suddenly emerged from the darkness of the other room and pointed out how disappointed he was and yet how proud of me for becoming man for the very first time."

"But, sheâ€"

"Was shipped that same morning to another village. Unknown destiny to be quite frank." Eret cut Astrid's question off, beginning to stand from the ground, dust his trousers clean and turned to face the ladies, "After that, marriage with the supposed lady chief was nuked after receiving a telegram saying she had died from a strong illness few months afterwards. My father dedicated his last years training me to trap dragons, I grew prouder of myself as I improved my skills but after moving on from my village, after his death, I roamed the seas in search for the woman I had lost for being thoughtless and stubborn. Few years ago, I learned she had married and had three kids of her own. So I decided to devote myself to dragon trapping for the rest of my days."

"And now you are a dragon rider." Ruffnut said.

Eret nodded, "Destiny has mysterious courses. We never know where it takes us even if we manipulate it into going on a certain path."

Astrid's palms closed into tight fists by her sides. She didn't want to accept it, but she knew how right he was. She couldn't run away with Hiccup because then she would be betraying her family honorâ€"which was all she'd been working for her entire lifeâ€"and Hiccup was the chief, and a chief doesn't just disappears without valuable reasons.

It only made her angrier the fact she had to stick with the rules in this case. But, why her?

"Listen, Astrid." Her steaming train of thought came to a stop when Eret directed himself to her, eyes sharp at his own as he walked toward both ladies. "I know I was wrong not to tell you about my slip back at the wilderness before anyone would give you wrongs about it. I do not expect an apology acceptance for I understand how you must've felt after such, and with all this going on, who could ever dare blame you? But, I tell you this, because I wish for you to understand my mistake. I know how special Hiccup is to you and how you might be to him. You never express it, but I noticed from the very first time I saw him search for your dragon back at the battle with Drago. I saw the look of surprise when he first saw another man riding on Stormfly's back, with you behind my back. He smiled and welcomed me immediately, but that first look of impression didn't escape my frightened catch of eye. I also saw how he made sure you



had found your dragon once the battle was over, how you two kissed as if no one else existed around you, how he steamed up at the sight of you giving me private lessons...I noticed it all."

Her tough stare and grip loosened, beyond her control. Had he really noticed all that? How? When? Where? How come she never noticed?

"You say you wouldn't assist at tonight's feast, Astrid. But I encourage you to. I might not have had the opportunity to spend our last minutes wide awake before they took my own lady from my hold, but you do. And those minutes of spare are to commence about now. Do not waste the gift of time the gods are granting you. If you are as wise as you claim to be, then forget everything for just one night, and be the lover you've always been for him."

\* \* \*

><p>"Hehe, Ruffnut will be <em>sooo<em> mad at me for using these again," Tuffnut mumbled to himself as he tiptoed to their usual table, which was now empty since everyone seemed to be elsewhere, either selecting their food at the end of the Great Hall or doing other kinds of irrelevant stuff for the care of the blonde male twin. "But she won't even know what hit her."

Tuffnut moved two mugs of mead closer to him. One, he took and poured the content under the table, then pulled a jar of pinkish, nearly clear liquid from his vest's pocket and poured it into the now empty mug until the very last drop had fallen from the jar.

"Of course, dear princess. Anything you want, you'll get, as I always say." Snotlout's voice startled the twin as he hid the jar back close to his chest with one hand and then moved a few steps to the right until reaching what seemed like an empty barrel, tossed the jar inside and moved back to the table.

"Oh yeah?" Ruffnut asked as she and Snotlout walked to the table, both holding a plate of roasted chicken. "So, this means I can turn your head on fire to see if it glows green?"

"Of course you canâ€" he cut himself off, dropping his prideful posture and then gave her a fake smile followed by a nervous, harsh swallow "Um, I don't think my head will be useful, why not try with something else?"

"Like what?" Ruffnut asked.

"I don't know, you canâ€" "

"Hey guys!" Snotlout was cut off when Hiccup greeted as he approached the table holding two plates of roasted Salmon and set them on the table, "Have you seen Astrid?"

"Here." The very Astrid responded, rubbing her right temple with her index and middle finger as she walked toward them. Her face didn't show quite the enthusiasm she was hoping for. On all contraire, she looked more like being sent to the verge of annoyance.

The music bothered her, the food reeked to her, the people around made her feel sudden sickness. All she wanted, all she had asked for, was to be all by herself for just one more night. Instead,

Hiccup authorizes a feast.

"I brought you food." Hiccup said as he watched her sitting on her usual spot by his big chair. He couldn't help but to curl his lip up into a tiny smile, just at the thought of her still claiming her spot by his side even when things weren't looking up that bright for them at the moment.

He hadn't found anything useful during his search all day long, but he still believed in himself, he believed that he will find what he is looking for, that Odin will accompany him throughout his willing sacrifice that night, as he only chose to take a brief break from his search to spend some justifying time by her side, before jailing himself all night long back inside the caverns and continue his deep search.

There were small shadows already forming beneath his eyes, showing how restless he was even though he rarely displayed it. Despite his troubles, Hiccup still intended to smile at everyone else, to act as if nothing bothered him as much as it shouldâ€”and did.

Hiccup wasn't willing to give up, it wasn't in his plans, and he surely wasn't looking forward to hearing news of his truest love becoming the mother of a child that was not his own or some sort.

He had to prevent all that from happening, as a price, he had his minutes at the feast perfectly counted.

"Not hungry." She flatly answered while facing down at the table, rubbing her forehead with a tighter pressure than earlier, as if that would stop the lasting throb inside her skull. When her gaze lifted, she found the twins arguing about some unknown subject to her, but as she saw Tuffnut holding two mugs in his hands, she glanced down at the table and in a flash, she had stood from her seat, snatched one mug from his hand, murmured her thanks and sat back down, sniffing it first, taking in the bitter odor of mead and took in a strong gulp. Ignoring how Tuffnut stiffened at her sudden snatch. Then shook it off, swearing the cup with the different brew was still in his hand and offered it to his sister.

Hiccup rose a brow at her unfamiliar actions, then shook it off as he tried to understand how she was feeling and gently pushed her plate a little closer to her, "Trust me, it will do you good some nutrients. You aren't eating that well lately."

"Thanks doctor Hiccup, but like I said, I am not hungry." She teased with a weak grin.

"Very funny, Astrid. But I'm serious,"

"So am I."

His gaze finally met hers, "Please?"

How could she say no to two pleading emerald gems like those? Eyes that secretly sunk her into madness every time they found their way to bewitch her soul. Without expecting so, her head lowered and rose in a slow motion. Eyes fell down to the fish and took in a deep breath before letting it go aloud. Soon, her mouth was working on some crunchy chewing.

Hiccup smiled. This time, his teeth showed. Then he turned back to his food and began silently eating.

"Excuse me, dearest." Billus' voice chattered her little mirror of peace as he stood on her other side.

Trying her best to ignore how his bold address to her made her feel even sicker than what she currently was, Astrid just minded her own business and continued eating her Salmon. Savoring it, recalling how tasty it was after knowing \_Hiccup\_ was the one who took the liberty of serving it for her.

"Care to dance?" Billus finished.

"No." She blurted.

Hiccup shot a shocked glance at her. He had his mouth full, but his eyes didn't hide how he couldn't believe the kind of disrespect dripping from her voice. Astrid didn't even bother to look up at Billus.

It wasn't the way she answered that concerned Hiccup, it was the thought of \_how\_ Billus would make her payback all the disrespect she has given him once the two were to be alone. Hiccup knew how much self-pride crawled into a Viking's head and took over through physical actions...Billus, was \_no\_ exception. Astrid knew very well how to defend herself, but that didn't take away the concern he felt within. This only gave him more reasons to keep on pleading every being in Valhalla to help him get Astrid out of this agonizing mess.

As Billus opened his mouth to speak, his entire attention was shifted to his father once he thought he'd heard him call his name from the barrels of mead. The boy huffed within, frowned down at a still well-focused-on-eating-Astrid and without saying another word, he left their side.

Hiccup watched him leave. Then looked back down at her, up at the twins stuffing stew and chicken into their mouths. At Snotlout trying to catch Ruffnut's attention from Fishlegs who was offering her a clean cloth to wipe the extra food from her face and neck. Out at his mother, who laughed and laughed at what looked like Gobber's jokes at the other side of the room. At the Vikings playing cheerful music, at Eret dancing and hopping steps with two women at once as they shifted turns with him. At how the food began slowly running out, how drunk men grabbed on the other women's waist and pressed them to their laps.

He saw it all, and while he did, sound ceased to exist for him. Realizing one thing, how much he wanted to enjoy the night with the woman sitting by his side. Not just eating and talking, but also just draining their energies until passing out to a deep sleep.

Knowing he couldn't just drain himself exhausted, \_if\_ he truly wanted to find a good reason to get Astrid out of this absurd arrangement. But he \_did\_ want to hold her. Even if it was for a small while.

"Astrid?" He softly called.

"Hm?" She swallowed,

"Dance, with me?" His tone was low and amazingly calm. His eyes back scanning her entire facial features as she cleaned the oil from her lips with a cloth nearby and looked back at him.

Hiccup was about to change his mind and begin adding excuses on how she should forget he ever asked, when he saw her slow nod. Causing him to drop a relieved little smirk and pushed the chair back before standing up, holding his hand out to her.

Slim and nearly frosty fingers trailed up his palm and were enclosed in his hold as she was pulled up from her chair and guided to a free spot in the room.

Their hands parted and in deep silence, both took two steps from each other, waiting for their cue to begin.

Dancing recommenced, and Hiccup decidedly approached the fair Viking, simply to claim her hand. With a hidden, delicate smile, she took her place by his side, firmly holding his hand in her own, standing for some time, not a word was said, not a sound was heard unless it were from the other Vikings chatting aloud. At last, music was released and their feet moved in astounding coordination. As if they accustomed to mark their steps in unison before the eyes of strangers, every single day and evening. As if all their fears dissipated, time halted, making every step...\_last for eternity\_.

No one was present anymore. There were just the two of them, focusing on nothing more than their opposite pair of eyes, reflecting their inner love through the crystallized color in their iris. Not a word was needed to be spread, for their touch and smooth movements said it all.

Bringing their bodies closer, and further from each other, rotating in slow unison, joining both palms above their heads, and then bringing them back down. Chest and chest threatening to crash every once in a while, feet floating from the ground, one of his hands resting on the small of her back while the other held her hand, guiding her to another slow rotation, following her guided movements as if he were trying to teach a child to move.

\_Fear\_, was just a myth and \_sorrow\_ became a six lettered word to themâ€”for the moment. For once in all of their suddenly collapsed world, the fact that this could be their very last dance together, had become into a worthless prediction.

Eyes watched in astonishment at the couple who seemed like they had turned into two angels coming from Asgard just to reflect their sudden forbidden love in plain mortal sight. Some watched them in awe, others in pity. But they all shared how surprised they were at how beautiful their two leaders took over the entire dancing space, darkening out those others that were dancing around them, having them bring their own dancing into a halt in order to watch the chief have one single dance with his ever-desired beloved.

The least Vikings were, was coordinate. Especially \_Astrid\_, who only focused on violence and all the extreme ways that ever existed. That, was the very first reason why every Viking witnessing them had become

so dumbfounded by what their eyes were focused in. It was impossible, completely unbelievable. As if other souls had possessed their bodies.

As if in sync, Hiccup's arm landed on the lowest of her back, fingers steadying her body as close against him as legally possible, his other hand held hers to their upper facial side, not too close to brush against their cheeks, but enough to be spotted by their natural sight reflex. Palm against palm.

His hand was bigger than hers now. His fingers were a little longer and wider.

Drowning in those endless ocean jewels that adorned her face, leaning closer to her own, and as he caught her eyelids slowly close, as if granting him an impossible initiated contact involving that pair of skinned lines called lips across the lowest of his face that always melted her insides and at the same time burnt her alive, Hiccup brought his lips near her ear, merely disappointing her, but keeping her in that numb little place she had allowed herself to be in every time they locked eye contact with each other. Until his whisper sent a strong amount of shock through her veins and straight up to her heart. "I forbid you to abandon this island."

Then, as if Thor himself had took a stronghold on her Achilles' heel and pulled her down from the clouds, having her strong body crash against the hard, cold ground to reality, Astrid didn't find words to respond. She knew what she wanted to say. Hel, she wanted to start protesting, pout, and tell Hiccup once more that he being the chief didn't give him even the slightest power of command in her life. She was to do what she thought was best for her people...not for herself.

Astrid Hofferson hardly thought of herself. Everyone knew that. she wasn't going to give it a try now that her entire family depended on her final will.

Though, as much as she wanted to spread out curses, contradictions, or even ask him not to goof around with a subject this delicate...she just couldn't.

Her heart pounded even faster than ever, having her feel numb all of the sudden. Unable to control her own movements, being able to slowly flex her legs backwards, still staring deep into his eyes, dangerously reflecting her pain through them until their hands fell apart.

What was worse, is that she had forgotten she was revealing her soft, vulnerableâ€"and not to forget mentioning forbiddenâ€" side to everyone present. Unconsciously letting everyone else witness each and every move they both performed.

They had already discussed this before. Many, countless times before. Not just with each other, but nearly everyone close to them. Gobber, Big-boobied Bertha, the twins, Fishlegs, Snotlout, Valka, Eret, even Spitelout and Phlegma. Debating on what was best for everyone, it all just drained Astrid's senses into none. She felt lost, numb...exhausted.

Everything she believed throughout her life that a Viking didn't and

\_shouldn't\_ feel, she had. Causing her to despise and feel ashamed on herself for the most part, but what else would she have felt if her back was right between sword and stone?

But, for Hiccup and Astrid, they were still the only two people in that place. Nothing mattered, but \_them\_.

Without another word spoken, Astrid's heels spun left, being Hiccup's sad, regretful eyes the last thing she sees before walking out the Great Hall and disappearing into darkness.

## 10. Secret Vase

"She'll be alright, Hiccup. Now please \_leave\_."

The sounds echoed in my head. My mother's voice sounded cold, sharp, and "as usual" unfriendly. I didn't hear Hiccup's voice in response that fast. As I gently pulled the covers down my face, to reveal just the eyes. I only saw my mother's broad back as she stood at the door of what seemed like...\_my room\_?

\_What\_ was I doing in my old bedroom? Wait, \_how\_ did I even get in here?

"Tell her to see me before doing anything else, as soon as she wakes up." Hiccup said.

Mom sighed, my eyes tried to peek and see if they could get a glimpse of Hiccup at the door, but all I could see was my mother's body blocking his way inside. He was too slim. Enough to be shadowed by her tall and wide figure.

"Listen ta me, Hiccup. As difficult as this may be for yeh, I know my daughter very well. She won't want ta face yeh anymore."

\_Says who!?" "I thought" "is she mad!?"\_

"But" "

"Enough, Hiccup." She cut him off. "Astrid has lots ta do once she wakes up, least she'll have time is ta see yeh and stay for a chitchat. Yeh better get used to it." She then chuckled "Oh, and please put that bloody damn blue reptile of hers in its cage."

"\_Stormfly, \_will want to go with Astrid." Hiccup said between gritted teeth. "And I find it unnecessary to lock down a dragon."

"She won't need \_it\_." Mom hissed.

"She'll want \_her\_." Hiccup responded.

"I want her." My voice seemed to have startled them both. Mother turned to the side and Hiccup inclined his body to his left to get a peek.

I was sitting already on my bed. Holding the covers up to my chest, covering my breast bands.

Hiccup hadn't seen me \_completely\_ layer-less. He might have had the confident to remove my armor from me, to loosen my braids. I might have opened those sacred doors for him, but has he seen me completely bare? Not really...

Tonight, I might be wearing my breast bands, and it still might not be that strange to us. But having my mother in the same room made me feel completely naked. Truly uncomfortable.

Hiccup managed to slide himself into the room without thinking what my mother would do to him for breaking his boundaries and simply walking into a bedroom with an almost nude maiden.

I wanted to smile up at him, but as much as I tried to build a little one for him, my lips felt awfully heavy instead. So did my eyes.

Making his way to my side, he climbed on my bed and sat right in front of me. His hand found my cheeks and rubbed them gently. "Feeling alright?"

I nodded. Though he seemed not to buy it after I heard his chuckle, "Liar." My eyes dropped. Unable to face him. Unable to answer. His fingers traveled their way to my chin and lifted it, quite forcing me to look at him. "\_Patience,"\_ he whispered.\_

My eyes welled up at his last word. Forgetting for a chance that my mother was right at the door, witnessing my attempts of weakness until I tried to replace the hurt with anger and snatched myself from his hold, turning to face the wall at my left.

How was he expecting me to have patience?! There were only \_hours\_ before I was to leave this town! Had he gone senseless?

"Hiccup," My mother called.

Hiccup sighed, though he delayed in moving from my bed, he cleared his throat and walked back to my mother. "There is nothing left to do." She said.

That reached its goal to strike my heart. Hiccup flinched, his limbs froze and as he turned to face her, his gaze was surprisingly sharp. Palms becoming tight fists, teeth clenched, "I still have hours of spare."

"Best ta give it up, boy."

Big-boobied Bertha would let no one talk her back, so she took a stronghold on the door and closed it before Hiccup could say something else.

"You \_know\_ he won't." I said.

She moved to my drawers and opened all cabinets. Taking loads of clothes and walking to my desk, where a big and wide opened bag rested.

"Have you?" She asked.

I just laid back on my bed, bringing the covers up over my shoulders and turning my body to the side, giving her my back. I wasn't feeling like answering any further questions related to the same useless subject. Not with her, not with anyone by chance. "How did I get here?"

"Try remember for yerself."

I frowned at her sudden coldness. No, it wasn't sudden. It had always been like that between us. Little the affection from a proud warrior like her, reminded me every day on how much I began to enjoy Valka's warm approaches. But, as much as I tried to remember what brought me back to my old home, to the warmth of the bed I basically spent all the nights of my life up till this moment, my thoughts were still a blur.

All I could think of as I mumbled, was, "I walked out on Hiccup after the dance, after that...I don't remember more."

She must've heard my low mutters defying the desires of keeping them to myself as she banged closed one of the drawers, having me shrink my head in my shoulders at the loud sound of it. "Hiccup followed you, so did I. Yeh began swaying side to side in the middle of the stairs and fainted. If it weren't for Hiccup, ye'd be well unconscious right now."

Was that true? Why can't I remember anything? Oh dear Odin, please, don't make me forget such an important event...again!

"Yeh drank Achlys brew." She explained, "I could smell the fruit once I got closer to yeh. I told Hiccup I was going ta take yeh back home and he brought you here."

Achlys fruits... I've heard of it.

According to what Fishlegs has taught us all about those mysterious fruits that weren't found that easily, if taken on a low to normal dose, the effects may be simply a temporary clouding of the memory. If taken on large doses, then there would be permanent lack of memory, loss of sight and hear proceeding death.

In all ends, those were vastly dangerous. But, who would have done such a thing? No...Not who, how on Earth were those fruits found since they do not grow here on Berk anyway?

This was all confusing to me. Last time I forgot how I got home, did I also drink Achlys?

Hm...Seems like now I do have some heads to trim down...

Good, some violence might do me good.

\* \* \*

><p>The recall on how Astrid walked out those massive doors and disappeared into the darkness was all he could think of.<p>

"Astrid! Wait, wait!" Running through the crowded place, trying to keep her insight, Hiccup remembered how he ran after her that last



night they danced together within the sight of most of their Village. As he passed through the half open doors, he brought himself into a quick halt once he found her swaying side to side as she walked down the stairs.\_

\_Hurrying down the steps to her, his girl's feet tangled themselves and she tripped. Her body instantly losing her balance and collapsed.\_

\_A strong hand caught her head before banging against the hard stoned step. Eyes closed, breath heavy and deep.\_

\_Hiccup moved her closer, bringing her body up his lap as he knelt underneath her and removed her damp bangs from her cold forehead. "Astrid? Wh...but..."\_

\_He couldn't speak. He was not only confused on what just happened before his eyes, but he was afraid it was something serious. It had been the second time in less than a week that she had fainted like this and Astrid Hofferson wasn't known for her weaknesses or constant sickness. She might be as hard as a rock, she may have as many strong and reserved layers as an onion, but she had an immune system that was as strong as a dragon's. She could pretty much stand anything.\_

\_"Yeh better not be the one responsible for her constant fainting, Hiccup."\_

\_A daring, low tone pierced his ears, having his entire body freeze in terror as he glanced up to meet the sharp gaze of Astrid's mother.\_

\_She wasn't happy alright...\_

\_"I...a...I...I don't know what you mean by that, Bertha."\_

\_"Yeh know pretty well. Yeh may be chief, but if yeh have something to do with her sudden sickness, then I will certainly never forgive yeh for dishonoring my daughter."\_

\_"Bertha, I can assure you that her sickness has absolutely nothing to do with what you are thinking." He shook his head, eyes straight, sharply serious back at her to see if she dared threat him once more.\_

\_She knelt down by her daughter and touched her forehead for temperature. "It better not." She spat back.\_

\_Hiccup's brows relaxed as he looked back down at an unconscious Astrid. It had to be something else... they haven't done anything that would put them in that kind of position and he trusted her enough not to even think about her betraying him with another man. A few days ago, his rate of trust might have been doubted. Because on what was spread about her and the new dragon rider amongst them that once was a dragon trapper. But there was a lot more needed to take down his absolute trust on her. Gossip, wasn't exactly it. \_

\_He knew her better than anyone elseâ€"better than her mother herselfâ€"a betrayal was completely unlike Astrid. So why even bother think about that as a possibility?\_

\_Bertha leaned forward and sniffed into Astrid's now lighter breath. Pulling back and nodding in understanding, "Let's take her home."\_

\_"Should we call for Gothi's help?" Hiccup asked.\_

\_"No need for that. She will be alright, she just needs the rest."\_

\_Bertha moved to pull the girl from Hiccup's embrace so she could pick her up in her arms but Hiccup frowned and tightened his hold on Astrid, blocking any possible way for her to take her daughter away from him. He extended his back and snaked his other arm over her chest. Suddenly keeping her possessively close.\_

\_"Let me." He said.\_

\_Bertha glared at him, but Hiccup ignored her and looked back down at the unconscious girl resting in his arms. He moved just enough to lift her, carefully laying her head on the stone as he moved to a more comfortable position beside her, slid a hand down and underneath her thighs, the other behind her back and with every strength he hadâ€”and didn't haveâ€”he lifted her into his arms.\_

\_They walked in silence to Astrid's home. Bertha opened the door for him and he made his way up to Astrid's bedroom. Bertha hurried herself to the room and lit the candles so Hiccup could be well aware of his steps. Then he laid her in her bed. His hands trailed down her legs and found her boots, taking them off and placing them neatly by the bed.\_

\_Just before his hands landed on her chest, intending to remove the straps that were hooked on the ring that was meant to keep her fur hood well held, Bertha gripped on his hand and yanked him from her daughter's side.\_

\_"Not this time." She said.\_

\_Hiccup swallowed hard and loud. Forgetting how he shouldn't be touching Astrid. Forgetting the reasons why she wasn't exactly his wife-to-be anymore, why he didn't have any more rights for affections toward her. How it was wrong of them to share those kisses and cuddles in the past three days. But, did they even care? No...Did Astrid care?\_

\_Though this wasn't Astrid, this was her mother. A fearsome woman that was never willing to accept a union between Stoick's scrawny son and her daughter. A prideful mother that only thought of strong alliances, war, and family beneficence. She always thought Hiccup was never to be capable of economically sustain a family and that his offspring would turn out to be as weak and useless as he was.\_

\_But Astrid thought otherwise. Astrid rarely found herself dealing with her mother and Hiccup arguing on what was best for her. At those kind of times, she always preferred to go and get lost with him. Try and forget why her mother was being too harsh on their relationship.\_

><em><br>One of the reasons why Hiccup usually avoided contact with Bertha, was because he didn't want Astrid to be affected by how her

mother treated him. Being the Chief's son didn't ring any fortunate bells to Bertha. It just wasn't enough for her.\_

><em><br>No wonder why she had been so eager to meet the third promised day. She wanted her daughter to marry Billus. She wanted Astrid to be the key for an everlasting alliance that would protect Berk from further disasters.\_

><em><br>With that last thought, Hiccup glanced one last time at his sleeping beauty and allowed the hefty woman drag him out of the room. "I'll stay here until she wakes up."\_

\_ "Yeh have other things ta take care of." She then slammed the door on his face. Having him wait with unbelievable patience behind that door. Pacing back and forth, waiting for a sign of alert, news that could assure him Astrid was to be alright.\_

Vanished the memory, Hiccup paced without rhythm through the stoned roads of the village, gazing down at his moving feet, palms wide open on his sides, fingers cold and lips chapped dry.

His feet led him to an empty, dark forge. Only the light rays of daylight allowed his eyes to find the obstacles he had to avoid, not to trip and fall. Toothless had gone to unknown grounds. Guessing he might be somewhere with Stormfly, cherishing those last few hours he wished he could share with Astrid.

It surprised him how smart Toothless turned out to be. He \_knew\_ something was up.

Even though neither Hiccup nor Astrid could ever confirm there was truly something between their two dragons, they always knew how the two of them communicated in a way that made them all understand something special had grown between both dragons.

For the past three days, Toothless had found his ways to assist Hiccup on all he needed with, but he made several glances at directions Hiccup couldn't understand. Then, after knowing all work for him was done, Toothless would run off and out of sight. Next thing he knew, people were talking on how they saw Toothless somewhere in the village walking alongside the female Nadder, sitting on a mountain nearby, or even fishing together.

Perhaps a \_very\_ strong friendship. Who knows? They still hadn't figured out whether dragons were interested in mating with a different class. Guess that was still left to figure out.

After leaving Astrid's house, he made one last trip to the Dragon Training Academy, and searched inside the supply rooms for something he could use to keep Astrid on Berk for at least a longer period of time.

But he had no luck. His eyes felt heavy, tired. He spent all three days completely restless, not having even the slightest chance of getting closer to what he hoped he could find. But, what exactly was he looking for?

Not even Hiccup knew what he was searching for. He just wanted to find something that could at least put a small halt to the arrangement, laws that could be used as suggestions for a better way of forming a good alliance between tribes. \_Anything\_.

Once his feet took him to the Blacksmith Shop, his eyes found the bed he'd been working on every time he found the time between his busy chief schedules. Frowning in curiosity as he notices the project's half uncovered, he walked toward it and suddenly felt a small wave of irritation as he threw the covers back over the bed.

He could have sworn he'd warn Gobber and Fishlegs, Snotlout and the Twins not to touch any of his projects for they were highly delicate and precious to him.

All of his projects were, but the ones he poured his entire heart and feelings in were most valuable to him. Those, were usually the ones he made for Toothless or Astrid. Not even the ones made for himself had he appreciated that much.

But then it hit him, what if it was Astrid the one who had found this unfinished surprise?

"It wouldn't be of much importance if I'll lose her soon enough." His words ghosted daringly out of his lips without any concern from his brain, making him feel as if it were spines that slit open their way out of his throat.

His lips brought a small, pained smile when within his thoughts, images of how he pictured his future with the woman of his eternal dreams were to be.

As his hands slowly uncovered the bed once again, just enough for him to appreciate the unpolished wood frames, he imagined once again her long curls all over her bare back, stubbornly taking most of the bed for herself.

His hand floated to his vision of her and moved to trace down the small of her back, drawing with his fingers the small depth of skin that evidenced her spinal cord existed in the middle of her back.

When his fingers moved upward to find their way to her head, his vision of her vanished as soon as his sight became opaque by the well that daringly took over his emerald eyes.

Soon after, small and silent tears rolled down his cheek.

Believing that there was another way, even when he still couldn't find anything, Hiccup took in a deeper breath, allowing his tears roll down his stubborn eyes, especially now that no one wandered around to catch a glimpse of him.

With every painful pound of his heart, his feet retreated. Backing away from the bed that soon made him realize how he at times, had to learn how to give up.

"I'm sorry, dad." He began. Low of voice. Struggling to find ways to speak without feeling as if it was like swimming through an iced river. "I didn't make it. I told you, I'm not the kind of man you always wanted me to be, I...have failed on nearly everything I should hold on to and know that should be valuable to me. I know, I should have known how to balance the burden and not carry it on my own. I should have learned when you once taught me that in a relationship, burdens are to be shared and not reserved within. I ruined your

plans, my plans. And I... I tried...I swear I tried but...I can't do anything about it. And that's what truly angers me. Not being able to do anything, even as the chief. You said, it was better to sacrifice in order to prevent a disaster. But, Astrid?"

Mentioning her name cut his own words off as his lungs begged for a quick breath, "Why does she have to be the sacrifice this time? I never thought I had to give up the thing I love most, hel, I never even imagined I was ever capable of caring for someone like that. Now that I know how much she truly means to me..." He looked up at the fair skies out the openings of the forge "...I'll have to give her up."

His words meant something, of course. But they were all hollow. Aside from pain dripping from every single one of them, none had any true meaning to his knowledge. He spoke of how he felt, how everything orbiting him turned out to be, but none of that did he truly believe. His mind still remained on the possibilities of finding hope somewhere. Despite everything else.

Yet, words were partially stronger than he expected, as they made his feet continue backing up, and a sudden thump against a wall shelf making all the nails, hammers, cans, knives and whatnot fall over his head and make loud noises once contracted against the ground. His knuckles cleared his eyes and he chuckled. Thinking on how now he had to clean all this mess before Gobber comes in and scolds him for being overly messy.

As he kneeled, Hiccup began taking the hammers first and placed them back on the shelves. When he kneeled the second time, brushing his fingers on the stoned floor, and grabbing every nail he found, his eyes caught a well rolled script threatening to fall out of the metal vase that had fallen from the shelves and landed not so far from him.

His hands let go of the nails and took a hold of the roll. Standing up, he unrolled the old-yellowed paper in his hands and frowned as he began curiously reading its content.

Hiccup's eyes then widened once he analyzed the meaning of each sentence. His chest rose and fell mimicking his heart's usual rhythm. Next thing he knew, he had flashed out the shop, yelling "Toothless!"

But Toothless was still nowhere to be spotted.

That didn't stop Hiccup from running his breath out through the streets, sending soft prayers to the gods above him not to allow his usual clumsiness to have him trip on his prosthetic foot and fall on his face. Fortunatelyâ€"for onceâ€"the gods might seem to be on his side as he felt a sudden force push him to run even faster.

Toothless was laying on his stomach, on a tall land not so far from the anchorage. His head facing forward, resting sadly on his paws as he watchedâ€"from the distanceâ€"how Stormfly climbed on the biggest boat and Astrid locked herself into the main cabin.

The fair female Viking was willing to give up her power of will for the sake of her village, for the benefit of those she loved the most.

Her ghosted presence was there, she didn't feel like saying any goodbyes, to hear blessings from the elders, to even \_look\_ at anyone. It had been her last choice, along with trying her best to avoid everyone on the ship, \_especially\_ Billus' future approach intents. thinking, that now nothing was left for her to say or do. Decisions were already made for her and all she had in mind for the moment, was nothing but all those memories she intended to keep vivid in her heart and sight, just to make her voyage less painful, less torturing...less lonely.â€Asides from also keeping herself from just wanting to rip someone's heart out and crush it with her own handâ€

Naturally, the Alpha Dragon wasn't happy with the thought of having Stormfly leave to unknown lands, where he wouldn't be certain on how she will be treated. Only the impolite look on the sailor's faces as soon as she reached port said it \_all\_. They all glanced at the female dragon with not caution, but displeasure.

All the while, Astrid glared back at all of them as if her eyes threatened them loud enough not to dare touch her dragon and even though Toothless wanted to convince himself that being with Astrid would mostly guarantee her protection, it still wasn't soothing enough.

They could protect each other very well as dragon and bonded rider, but Toothless wanted to be \_the one\_ protecting the Blue Nadder, as much as Hiccup wanted to with the reserved warrior whose life's course had drastically changed.

He snapped alarmed once he heard Hiccup call out for him, moving his ears side to side. Head shooting back up as he recognized the direction from where this familiar voice was coming from when he saw Hiccup run toward him, faster than he would think of.

Toothless tilted his head to the side in confusion when Hiccup yelled, waving his left arm in direction to the docks, holding the roll tightly on his right "Toothless! Stop that ship!"

Toothless blinked, but as he saw how worked up Hiccup was, Toothless didn't wait any longer. With the orders of halting the voyage, he was content enough. So he jumped from his restful spot, got ahead of the agitated human and ran down the wooden ramps, skipping one over the other to avoid the annoying spirals he had to make in order to reach the sand.

When he saw the ship begin to float away from its assigned dock, the Night Fury took in a deep breath and beamed a plasma shot at the sails, making the ship stumble side to side and soon halt its further navigation.

Every sailor ran alarmed to the railings of the ship, throwing ropes to the men at the docks, but they were too far to be pulled back to land.

Stormfly trotted over to the ship's pore, squawking at the Night Fury as Astrid dashed out of the cabin, curious to know what was going on when Hiccup climbed on the Night Fury's back, ignored how Bertha rushed herself toward him and moved the pedal backwards.

Sooner than thought, Toothless abandoned the grounds and glided to

the ship, landing right in front of Stormfly and Astrid, who had her hand resting on the Dragon's wing comforting her so she wouldn't get scared and suddenly start shooting spikes all over the place.

"Wait!" Hiccup exclaimed as he climbed off his dragon, "This voyage is canceled!"

"Hiccup?" Astrid mumbled, he glanced down at her, but as breathless as he was, he tried to keep his serious posture and turned to face back at Osch and his son who were walking past Astrid and getting closer to the fatigued dragon trainer.

"What on Thor's name is going on here, Hiccup?!" Osch irritably said.

"Now you'll have to fix my sails! Do you know how precious they are? We got them from Athens!" Billus said. Crossing his arms over his chest.

"I promise, I will fix them. But first, you must know something very important." Hiccup said.

"Then spit it out at once, boy!" Osch said. Resting his knuckles on his sides.

"Astridâ€"she can't go with you." Hiccup breathed.

"What?" All threeâ€"Osch, Billus and Astridâ€"said in unison. Then Osch frowned back down at the young chief before him, "We have discussed this before, Hiccup. It's been decided."

"No, listen to me. Sheâ€"" he breathed "She can't go anywhere with you because of this." He showed them the roll in his hand.

Osch snarled unconvinced and snatched the script from Hiccup's hand, unrolling it and beginning to read.

"You know, this kind of interruption to a fair deal will cost you, Hiccup." Billus carelessly said.

Hiccup grinned impossibly audacious and slowly walking closer to Astrid, "I am aware of that. But if any treaty is meant to be formed, then it can, but it cannot involve her."

Billus seemed eager to know what the young chief meant by that, so he went over to his father and peeked for some reading over his father's arm.

Astrid stepped forward, closing the gap between them, "What is going on, Hiccup?" She whispered just for him to hear.

His lips stretched into a brighter smile, cheeks flushed in dark pink for the exercise, chest still uncontrollably rising and falling, but both of his hands found hers and encased them in his own, lacing their fingers together. His eyes glistened, his teeth shown as he took in a deep breath and let away a long sigh of relief "My dad, has taken care of everything involving us."

## 11. Sacred Oaths

"My dad, has taken care of everything involving us..."

Those words echoed in her head as her most cherished treasure—other than herself—brought her into a mellow and possessive embrace. Her arms still dangled on his sides. Hesitant on all the rights and wrongs of reacting to his unexpected approach.

By now, Astrid had even grown to imagine herself sailing further and further from her home land. But apparently, she wasn't. Being held by the arms of the one she had always enjoyed so much having around, at this instance, simply confused her instead of cheering her up.

Blue eyes drifted to where Osch and Billus carefully stood, reading the mistreated old and yellow piece in their hands. Trying to interpret what seemed like a poorly practiced script.

Her body was completely stiff against Hiccup's, whose careful fingertips slightly trembled against the thin layer that hid her skin from the eyes of others. Her chest was being beaten up by the hasty rise-and-fall movements as he struggled to balance his breathings back to normal. His arms were unsteady around her. Tightening and slightly loosening over and over again, as if hoping she wouldn't slip away once more.

Unstable and failing pants were loud enough for her right ear to feel slightly uncomfortable as he glued his cheek against her own, closed his eyes and deeply inhaled her scent until finally calming himself into at least someplace near normalcy.

But, time without a response from her lips—or even her own body—soon began to release waves of confusion to him. Indeed, it was just somehow getting a bit exasperating not feeling her arms wrapped around his own. As if her body wasn't even controlled by her for a fleeting moment.

Hiccup's eyes didn't stop welling thanks to the scare of nearly losing her for all eternity, but his lips parted and no tear was allowed to be released.

About to allow his voice take part on an awkward silence between them as the only sound his ears reached was the one of sailors mumbling nonsense around them, Osch and Billus silently interpreting the script in their hands and the ocean waves silently banging against each other. Yet, nothing from her.

Hands begun slowly sliding backwards against the skin of her back, across her sides, hesitantly moving his left foot backwards so he could move away from her when a low toned whisper that was nearly impossible for him to catch, had caught his attention back to her once again especially after having her forehead surrender to the warmth of his shoulder and soon her nose crashing against the lowest of his neck. "Hiccup, I. Don't. Understand. Anything."

Thin lips tickled on the bridge of his collarbone and warm breathings just sent shivers down his spine while careful fingers steadied themselves on the lowest of his waist. Keeping him from parting away.



\_Now wonder, she's just shocked\_...â€"He thought. Realizing all the relief it brought to him as he exhaled in silence. Moving his arms to encase her once again. Making her fingers crawl up his lower back and rub against the softness of his tunic.

Hiccup, wasn't wearing his flight suit that morning. Only his usual trousers, greenish tunic, a fury vest and his hand-bands. He looked pretty much like how he used to dress like back when he was fifteen.

Soon, her head switched positions. Turning to the other side, resting her temple on his shoulder-bone and gazing out at the almost-dead ocean around them. Allowing her eyes to catch everything they could from the far away mysteries hidden right after that thin line that divided the skies from the waters.

Hiccup hid his lips and nose on her golden hair. Taking in her lavender scent and relaxing his muscles as he exhaled. "Astrid, I. \_Noâ€|we,\_ um. You seeâ€" "

"\_Hogwash\_" Billus hissed. "This is an unchangeable insult to my existence!" Taking the paper from his father's hold, crumpled it in his hand and tossed it to the ground. Then turned to face the two lovers and point challengingly at them. "I demand a reasonable explanation to this. One that will keep my hand from signing a declaration of war instead of peace against this feeble island!"

The now mistreated ball of paper rolled to Astrid's boot and as she opened her eyes and pulled slightly away from Hiccup, her gaze found the root of her confusion lying by her foot.

Kneeling down and picking it up, she carefully smoothed it straight and began reading its content. Ignoring by far Billus' distant curses and paces all around the boat and Hiccup pulling further from her just enough to stand before her and babble useless words she perfectly knew wouldn't actually make Billus retreat from his current thoughts of declaring a war.

So she just decided to let him try as much as he desired to calm Billus' fury and simply focus on the item grasped by her very hands.

The ship was already being tied to the docks by the Berkians below and soon it had become the welcoming station of the twins, followed by Fishlegs and then Snotlout. Gobber came along a little while after.

Astrid's brows furrowed as she realized \_whose\_ handwriting had been perfectly saved in that poorly treated piece of paper.

"\_Stoick\_â€|" She mumbled to herself.

It was rather difficult for her to even understand fluidly what was written in it. For the crumple didn't help her at all and it was also clear that this thing had much more than a year of being stored and well forgotten. Nevertheless, she tried her best to capture every single word.

\_\*\*I, Stoick the Vast Haddock, hereby declare that for the formidable

good of Berk's villagers; the Hairy Holligans, a union between two souls shall be granted. By merging together the lives of my one and only heir, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third and the fair shield-maiden Astrid Hofferson; lonesome daughter of the belated and dearly missed Berkian Vincent Hofferson and the fierce swordfighter Bertha, best known as Big-Boobied Bertha. Both firstborns may join in public matrimony after my son, Hiccup's eighteenth birthday. Nevertheless, once this contract is signed by both families, it cannot be revocable.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Today, seventh Thursday before the first estimated strongest blizzard of the year, I Stoick the Vast, have come to pre-matrimonial agreements with the swordfighter lady Bertha and secured a munda on behalf of my son of forty pounds of Northern Runes and fifteen pounds of golden doubloons for Astrid Hofferson's hand.\*\*\_

\_\*\*To ever come the day I fail in existence, and either life may play an unfair card to Hiccup's life as well due to unknown reasons, I declare the succession of Astrid Hofferson as my second-handed heir.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Coming to publicly announce this unity, both, Hiccup and Astrid are currently legally contracted and therefore married below the eyes of Odin, Father, and Frigga, Wife and Mother, who had blessed this union. Moreover, the lady Astrid is, from this day onwards off limits to the eyes of any other man.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Not fulfilling this contract correctly as how Odin Father commands it, consequences will result as unforgiving treason and thus must be paid in prison. Therefore all rights over the young shield-maiden will be conceded to my son once this contract is signed by both families in the eyes of not only Odin and Frigga, but also three mortal witnesses, whom in this case are Lady Gothi, the Wise Elder of the Hairy Holligans, Gobber the Belch and Spitelout Jorgenson.\*\*\_

\_\*\*I, Bertha Hofferson, hereby accept on my belated husband's behalf, the union of my first and only daughter Astrid, with the young Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, son of Stoick the Vast, respected chief of Berk. Accepting as well the entry of forty pounds of Northern Runes and fifteen pounds of golden doubloons for her hand.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Therefore I, with this present's Wise Elder, Gothi, will make sure this contract is forever respected and never allow reasons to betray my chief's will. Only to give way to hope of an alliance between the two families and await for strong progenies that will defend our land in a near future and giving away a Heiman Fylgia of ten ounces of silver.\*\*\_

\_\*\*We, Spitelout Jorgenson, Gobber the Belch and Gothi the Elder, assert ourselves as witnesses of this lawful betrothal agreement made by our chief, Stoick the Vast Haddock and accepted by our most valuable swordfighter Big-Boobied Bertha. Safeguarding the dowry and engaging to fulfil every last command in this compact, and thus confirming and authorizing such.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Hence it is in accord that once Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third achieves his eighteenth birthday, he is free to choose a date to celebrate in public his marriage to the young Astrid

Hofferson.\*\*\_

\_\*\*Signed;\*\*\_

\_\*\*X. Stoick the Vast Haddock \*\*\_

\_\*\*X. Bertha "Big-Boobied" Hofferson\*\*\_

\_\*\*X. Gobber the Belch\*\*\_

\_\*\* X. Spitelout Jorgenson\*\*\_

\_\*\*X. Gothi the Elder\*\*\_

Iris slowly floated upright. Finding the hopeful sight of her beloved before her. Hands slightly shaking as they intended to keep a firm hold on the object threatening to fall from them.

Hiccup turned to catch her silent call. Moving his hands just to find her forearms and slowly brushed his fingers up her arm straps, to her shoulders, gently tickling her neck, up her perfectly rounded cheeks, studying every trace of her skin underneath the tip of his little explorers, savoring her cold and unbelievably anxious presence until the tip of his index finger caught a single tear that had violated her barriers and astonished her since she didn't even realize her eyes had welled up.

He wanted to say something courageous and perhaps a little lulling. But as much as he thought of the proper words to spread, his voice didn't seem to activate at all.

Then, it were her confounded lips that released a soft whisper that she'd hope only his ears could catch, "Looks more like a will to me..."

"Aye," Gobber intruded as he turned his back from Osch and rambled toward her. He then glanced right over the parchment held by Astrid's hands. "If that is what I think it is, then Aye. Stoick wanted to make it more personal."

Hiccup's eyes glistened like a hidden diamond yearning to be taken out of its urn when Gobber's words sounded as if a red brick had just smashed against the back of his head. Making his brows curl into a surprisingly angry frown. "You knew about this?" Then snorted, "Gobber, you were a witness. How come you never spoke of this, not even to me?"

Gobber shrugged, gently taking the script from Astrid's hand and revising it. "Eh, don't blame me, lad. We were told it had been lost and burnt on one of the mistaken fires."

"By whom?" Hiccup asked.

"Eih..." Gobber's unsure eyes startled all over the place but then landed over a particular figure amongst the crowd on the beach.

A Berkian whose massive and tall body stood out from nearly all the other women around her. Dark hair braided into two perfect buns over her ears. Fists resting firmly over her waist, eyes focused sharply on Gobber and lips curled into a pout.

Hiccup's arm ghosted around Astrid's waist. Turning them in unison facing their beach.

Astrid's eyes fell on who Gobber was speaking of, and then took in a silent deep breath and let it go rushing the words along  
"\_Mother\_"

Bertha just huffed within, glared at them three and then turned around. Astrid's eyes fell to the ground as soon as she saw her mother simply walk away in disappointment.

Though her low mood didn't last for too long once she heard some awfully familiar dragon growls as for when she turned to slightly glance over her shoulder, she saw Stormfly slowly backing from five sailors that had begun circling her, menacing her with their lances.

"Whatâ€" " She didn't even have time to ask what was with them when Toothless hopped over them, making Hiccup impulsively place a hand over Astrid's head and instinctively crouch them both to the ground as Toothless landed in front of the female dragon who had just whipped her tail sideways, spraying poisonous spines on a perfect line between the two dragons and the humans around them while Toothless hollered at a rate that everything around them began to crumble and the ship they were on swayed unstable. Having every mortal in that ship lose their most firm balance. The Night Fury's entire spine turned a stunningly glowing blue and as he drew in some breath, his throat emitting a bright blue smoke, preparing his lungs for a plasma blast.

"Stop!" Hiccup yelled, letting go of Astrid's sides and rushing to stand himself between the dragons and their guests.

When Astrid's glance rose, she noticed a tall man covered in a furred black cloak and a creepy scar across his lip; intending to poke Stormfly's leg with the tip of his spear.

It was then when she realized Stormfly had reacted instinctively once feeling startled by oneâ€"or manyâ€"of the men supposedly making her feel uncomfortable. And she didn't blame the dragon. Simply because Astrid had felt uncomfortable herself from the very moment she set foot on that ship.

"I still demand a marriage, Hiccup." Billus hissed, pushing himself through his men and standing right before Hiccup. His brows tightly furrowed. Jaw clenched. "Or else you will have to pay for all this trouble and shame you've put us all through."

"I know. And I'm sorry. I already promised I'd fix your burnt sails." Hiccup said.

"It's not the sails I speak of, you idiot! Forget about the damn sails!" Billus barked back.

Astrid's palms closed into tight fists. Becoming suddenly alarmed by how Billus was speaking to Hiccupâ€"who actually stayed as calm as everâ€"she was still ready for any surprise attack, though.

"\_Her\_. I want the woman to be \_mine\_" Billus growled his words.

Sounding more like a ferocious beast wanting to defend what was his.

Hiccup sighed, dropping his shoulders as if in a quick surrender, but then stiffened himself back together, "I already told you, Billus. You may have any other woman you desire. But Astrid, is by law my wife. It has been this way for two years now." His lips stung into a small, fainted smirk, "We just never had the chance to prove it until now."

"But it hasn't been consummated. Which means it can still be nulled anâ€" "

"It won't be, Billus." Hiccup's voice sounded sharp this time as he cut the young man before him short. As if the words -nulled- bothered him somehow.

"There is a legal contract in all this and it is clearly stated under Viking traditions that a marriage contract is by far one of the most sacred compacts since it is done in Frigga's honor." Gobber informed, walking to stand by Hiccup and no less give him the chance to redeem his calm.

"Which means that we are involved in a commitment of which we are not to be released, therefore, you are really intending to marry another man's wife." Hiccup's voice sounded more pleasing than troubled this time. A small smirk trying to be held back from his lips and not make it just too obvious of how glad he was that this kind of promise actually existed.

Astrid took advantage to silently slide herself behind all men in her way until reaching their steamed dragons, resting a soothing hand on Toothless' side of neck. He tilted his head just fast enough to assure her he'd hear her coming and then glared back at the threatening men before him.

With four longest fingers absently rubbing on the black dragon's scales, she mumbled a few words for just him to catch. Eyes focused on the men before them as well while her other arm extended to Stormfly's direction, holding her palm up to keep her dragon steady for a while longer.

The warmth concentrating on her cheeks didn't show any decency or respect on her as she quietly listened to the conversation.

This was all just so unreal to her...

Hiccup talking about marriage and intimacy out loud, them being actually contracted for two years and didn't even know it, her mother hiding the facts from them...from her.

There were still some doubts that had to be dusted clean before she made any steps forward on this subject. Astrid wanted to have the chance to speak with her mother. Alone. To ask why did she hide this from her. Why, with dowry and everything well-coordinated, she was still willing to give her own daughter away to the arms of a barbarian. It struck her heart. In silence. But it surely did.

Yes. First, I have to wait to get off this dreadful ship. Then, run uptown to my house where I naturally guess mother would be at. If

not, then search for her by Garg's Eye River, where she usually spends the day training and whatnot. After peacefully talking with her, I should then probably pay Gothi a quick visit. Make sure I am not just making stuff up and imagining her name in Stoick's contract between Hiccup and me. Then stâ€" \_

"I want no other woman. I want yours." Billus' voice pierced through her thoughts. Interrupting her inner babble as she intended to mentally schedule her day. Scooting out the grave possibilities that things could just go not according to planâ€"As per usual.

"Excuse me?!" Astrid just had to spit back at that. Dropping both arms by either of her sides, glaring at the young brainless visitor. "Do you really think I am to be spoken of as if I was some kind of object or some sort?"

Both men, Hiccup and Billus lifted their eyes to meet hers. Which were truly far from calm and happy, while Gobber just shook his head in shame. As if he had been expecting this to happen.

Billus snorted. "Women were made by the gods for a man's entertainment and assistance. Not more. Not less."

"Right. And I suppose you expect me to follow your expectations of a woman's role with a man and simply go on with you as if nothing ever happened? Crawling down to your feet, kissing and licking every trail you leave behind." As she spoke, she slowly paced toward him, circled him while frowning. "Swallowing down my anger of how you may bring every wench you desire to bed and then use me as a second option after emptying yourself in one of those humiliating beings that cannot even deserve to be called women?" Her steps led her to halt right in front of him, taking a firm grip on the upper hem of his tunic and pulling him brusquely closer. "If that is what you had been expecting, then I apologize for disappointing you, your highness. But if I ever catch my husband even exchanging gooey eyes with a wench, I will firstly slit his eyes out and feed one to the worms in the ground and keep the other as a sweet reminder of how I demand being respected by others."

Billus couldn't help the loud noise his heavy swallowing provoked as his eyes intended not to allow themselves being drowned in her frightening stare.

"So you won't null the contract, I guess." Osch asked, though it sounded more like a statement since he spoke his words between a long, surrendering sigh.

"No." She said.

Billus hissed. "Then we will have no other choice but to declare a war."

Hiccup's body stiffened. "Wait. There is no need for a war, Billus. We can still find another way to seal the treaty. There is another choice, no doubt of it."

"No treaty with Berk, Hiccup." Osch intruded. Stepping securely toward them and standing right by his son's left.

As he walked closer, Astrid exhaled aloud through her nostrils and let go of Billus' tunic, backing from him and standing right between Hiccup and Gobber.

Toothless walked to stand on Gobber's left while Stormfly moved to Hiccup's right.

Their position was clear. They were shielding the couple.

Osch glanced over his shoulder to find Snotlout standing just a few feet from him, with both fists well tightened and his jaw well clenched. Billus blinked to his right and saw how Fishlegs moved to stand by Toothless. Tuffnut silently growled within while Ruffnut kept her stare at the other sailors.

"With this experience," Osch began, drawing slowly his eyes back to the young chief "I shall note how poorly managed this island is, not to know where it's Chief's status stands on. We accorded a marriage in three days and on the very last second you come up to me and say she has already been legally contracted to you long before yeh even knew it. To me, this is just product of a game from your part and an act of treason which must be paid with war."

"Treason?" Astrid snorted "Since when an unwilling act counts as treason?! Someone should stick aâ€"

Her voice was silenced once a thin and sharp blade brushed against the back of her throat.

Stormfly rose herself and spread her wings wide, almost as if threatening to smack someone when Astrid glared at Osch and Billus. "You are a coward." She hissed.

"Um, Astrid?" Hiccup called, in a soft tone, "I really think now is not the best time to speak your mind right now..."

"He doesn't have the balls to kill me while being so far from home, surrounded by dragons." She kept her maddening stare. "If he had, then he would have from the moment I said my first no."

"You underestimate my power, girl." Osch snarled, taking one long step to her. Toothless also stepped once forward, glaring up at the one approaching Astrid. Her hand gently stopped him from going further. But her eyes never abandoned Osch.

"Prove me wrong then." She dared. "Kill me here and now. Show me how powerful you jabber so much to be."

"I will. But not today, dearest maiden." Osch replied, giving Toothless one last glance before spitting at the wooden floor before the Dragon and turning his back on them. "One day, I will have you down to my knees, screaming for my mercy."

Astrid had it. In no further than another second, she had back-kicked her foot on the member belonging to the subject standing not so far behind her, making him drop the sword from the back of her neck and let it fall to the ground, kneeled and then laid on his back with both hands pressing tight against his groin. She then skipped forward, turned and grabbed the sword from the ground waving it twice around her when the winds suddenly began blowing loud and strong

enough to halt her initial plans of stabbing the very first person that dared touch her once more.

The ship stumbled then, side to side as for when the sailors peeked over the railings, wide and dark blue tail fins emerge from the waters. Going towards their ship.

"Hiccup!" Valka yelled from the beach. Covering her eyes with her forearm to keep the sand from getting to her eyes as the wind's strength increased. "\_Seashockers\_"

"We have to get out of here." Hiccup said. They all nodded. Astrid let go of the sword and ran towards Stormfly, climbing on her with one quick hop. She extended her arm out for Ruffnut to take and pulled her behind her back.

The ocean began to get wilder as a strong wave suddenly pushed the ramp down to the waters.

"Now how will we get back to the beach?" Snotlout asked.

"Are you seriously asking that?!" Astrid smacked. Elbowing Ruffnut, making her sigh in exasperation and then stretch her arm out for him. He grabbed it and hopped on the dragon. Holding onto Ruffnut's shoulders.

Gobber cupped his lips in his good hand, "Grump!"

The massive Boulder Class Dragon flew into the swaying ship as its rider hurried himself on him and soon began taking off after Tuffnut climbed on his back as well and held onto Gobber's shoulders.

Fishlegs climbed on Toothless once Hiccup was already on him. Hiccup exchanged glances with Astrid and nodded for her to take off first. She did. Then, he followed and they all flew back to the beach.

When they landed, the winds grew even stronger, pushing Osch's ships further from the island and the Tidal Class dragons circled them until the wind soon calmed down and the next thing Berkians could see were a few dark dots on the waters being pushed away by Tidal dragons.

"I've never seen Seashockers so close to Berk before..." Hiccup muttered as he unclimbed Toothless and walked towards Astrid who was now hopping from Stormfly.

"They sent the Hollibusians away." She said.

"They did us all a favor." Snotlout hissed.

"Yep. Take it as a gift from Thor himself." Gobber teased while dismounting Grump and fixing on his pants. He knew there were still some things to be discussed. But he did also know that the question he'd been meaning to ask ever since he knew of the contract's existence, was much more intriguing than any other subject for the moment. "Anyway, so!" His grin widened as he approached the young chief, who stood right in front of Astrid, simply eyeing her as he usually did to make sure she was completely alright before gifting her the cheapest smile he could come up with.



â€œShe did the same thoughâ€œ"

"Eh, Hiccup?" Gobber called once standing right by them.

"Uh, yes, Gobber?"

"Just out of curiosity." Gobber began, "Now that we know the contract is still valid and all that, and the Hollibusians are far away gone and not that I am selfishly thinkingâ€œespecially now that another battle awaits us while in such a critical stateâ€œbut, many are wondering...not me, of course, but many, wonder when will we have your connubial event in public?"

Hiccup kept his eyes on Astrid. Finding her hands and gently taking on and off grips on them before pulling her closer. "I don't know..." He whispered. Soon, a small-mischievous smile was slowly growing on his lips. Directing his following words to her, "What do you say? May we celebrate a marriage, without having to wait those three months we announced not long ago?"

Astrid smirked, not even hesitating to nod in agreement.

"Tonight, then?" Hiccup asked. Still in whispers.

Her eyes widened. "Tonight? Hiccup, it's...don't you think it's too soon?"

Hiccup playfully pouted at her, "But soon is soon, Astrid. Besides, it's only the celebration that is left to be done."

"Yes, but we still have many things to do before that." She Pointed out.

"Like what?" Snotlout asked. Making Astrid realize she wasn't exactly talking as low as she was hoping to.

"Well, um, like..." She thought it through, then chuckled, "We have nowhere to go after the wedding and we can't simply go back to Hiccup's house to spend our first night as newlyweds."

"Uh, you. Have. A. Cabin. Smart one." Ruffnut mocked.

Astrid glared at her, "It is unfurnished."

"We can fix that," Hiccup cheered. "I mean, the bed is almost done. It only needs the small details and it's ready to be used."

"But, Hiccupâ€œ"

"Listen, Astrid." He cut her off in the gentlest ways he could think of. Letting go of one of her hands and placing his fingers on her shoulder then moved them up to cup her cheek. "I never thought I'd be this happy to take in a marriage contract. I never even imagined my dad wanting us together so badly. But now, I realize how relieved I am to be tied up in the most positive possible ways. We've known each other practically since we were kids, together for five years and now we learn we've been contracted for two years by now. What more is there to wait?"

"We can help on whatever is left to do beforehand. We still have all day left." Gobber said.

"That's right, guys. It's only twelve hours before sundown. There are many things we can do during this time if we rush ourselves adequately." Fishlegs informed.

"I am pretty sure we can." Valka assured, smiling warmly at the couple who just realized she was holding the famous compact in her hand and her eyes were welled up in pride and hopes after seeing her late husband's very own little gift.

Truth was, Atrid felt the same way. "Just like Valka" Though her sudden stiffness made Hiccup begin thinking otherwise, she was just trying to take in all that had happened in just a short period of time for them.

It all just felt as if part of one of her maddening dreams that suddenly turned into nightmares and then switched back into the sweetest kinds that always made her desire they'd last a little longer, had finally come true.

As soon as she saw Hiccup's enthusiasm gradually fading from his eyes, her lips lifted a small yet secured smile and her hand gripped on his own as her head leaned to his touch. Letting his fingers immediately rub as gentle and slow against her skin. "Nothing, Hiccup."

"Will you marry me, then?" He asked once again. This time, in another low whisper, leaning slowly down to her.

"I will." She whispered back, moving her face closer to his as slowly as he did. "I always do. But"

"But?" He whispered, lips at the verge of touching.

"Tomorrow, is Frigga's Day..." She didn't have to say more. Their eyes closed and their lips collided together. Her teeth possessing his lower lip before letting it go and pushing her tongue in his mouth as slow as ever. His other hand let go of hers and moved to rest on the lowest of her hips then slid to her back, pulling her tight against his body while the one he held her cheek in slid to the back of her neck and stroked her skin. Her arms moved over his shoulder and jailed him close.

Their lips exchanged nothing more than delicate and tender kisses when Hiccup then whispered against her lips, "Then tomorrow, we will wed."

"Ha! What did I tell you!?" Stoick cheered, smacking his mug down against the rounded table as he glanced back down at the looking water in the hollowed center of the stoned table, where he sat only accompanied by a little less buff man. "My son is one clever boy, isn't he?!" Pride spilling all over the place as he spoke, "I knew he'd find it soon enough."

The man by him had blonde, long hair made in one braid-tail that reached his middle back. His beard wasn't as broad as Stoick's, but it did reach to his neck and his mustache covered his thin lips. Eyes were a pale blue. He was wearing a dark-silver tunic, a black

furred cape draped over his shoulders and dark trousers. He wasn't wearing a Viking helmet, but over his head, rested a very thin silver crown with a coin on its front, a Triquetra engraved on it.

Even though his ears were listening to Stoick's prideful babbling, his eyes were well lost in the reflection they were both enjoying from what was happening down on Berk at the moment. Specifically, on the young blonde maiden being kissed by Berk's new chief.

"I never thought I'd say this, but," he sighed the words, making Stoick halt himself and give in some of his enthusiastic attention to his companion. "You, may never get to imagine how relieved I feel to see her back in safe grounds."

Stoick sighed, placing a hand on the man's back. "We did well in sending those waves and winds. Otherwise we would hardly get Osch and his men away from our lands."

"Yes, but now our children will have to face a sturdier fate."

"They have proven themselves several times, Vincent. They won't stop now." Stoick said.

"I agree." He nodded, still looking down at her. "And I am also glad I will get to be in her thoughts during her wedding."

"Aye, do not spoil the surprise, my old friend." Stoick chuckled.

Vincent, faintly smiled. Rubbing his thumb against the mug in his hand while watching the couple now pull from one another, Gobber announcing aloud the upcoming wedding and everyone around cheering.

Stoick sat next to Vincent, "Ah, I am looking forward to seeing my son marry Astrid. I am very proud of both. Always been."

Finally, Vincent glanced back at Stoick, "I never get to thank you enough, for watching after my daughter while I was gone. She appreciates you as much as I'd wished she'd appreciate me."

Stoick chuckled, "Aye, no need to thank me, Vincent. Astrid had always been the daughter I always desired my Val ta bear for me. But, destiny got in the way far too soon. So while I had Hiccup, I learned how I might not have the daughter I wanted fer myself, but I also learned I would be more than proud and pleased ta have her take good and special care of my boy."

Vincent snickered, "I truly doubt she would take good care of him with that cooking of hers."

Stoick laughed. "I doubt he'd be dumb enough to actually let her anywhere near the kitchen."

Both Vikings laughed for a while longer before Stoick settled his eyes back into their looking waters. Vincent followed. Watching how Hiccup walked Astrid up to her house. How they talked so merry and stress-less with each other and the rest of the gang that followed them.

Vincent and Stoick, both knew their descendants were leading themselves to have a word with Bertha. To receive some \_answers\_.

Stoick then sighed, "Do yeh know why I went behind their backs, eh Vincent?"

Vincent looked back up at his chief. His eyes fell on Stoick's silver crown over his head, which was a lot bigger than Vincent's and instead of having a coin with a Triquetra engraved in it, the crown actually \_formed\_ a Triquetra. It also had a few small red rubies on either sides.

"I created that compact hoping their relationship would grow closer in time. \_Yes\_, I did it thinking more on Berk's sake. I knew a union between my son and the strongest-youngest-female fighter would bring great fortune to Berk. As time went by, I noticed how Astrid developed greater abilities that would enchant any other tribe into wanting her in. I thought I had to keep her in Berk as long as I could. A marriage, would have been the best option and who better than my own son to keep her safe in Berk? Although at first I was planning to talk Bertha into creating a contract between Astrid and Snotlout, but then I noticed how Hiccup intended to prove himself not just to surprise me or the entire island, but he always pushed himself further just to impress the \_girl\_. So I said to myself, \_Stoick, yeh have ta do some'ting about this.\_" His lips curled up and his eyes glanced at the stoned rooftop. "So, when Hiccup was eighteen, he spoke of how he wanted to marry Astrid and how frightened he was on asking her the big question. Yet, the contract, already existed. So I chose to keep it to myself. I thought I'd never truly need it. After hearing my son say he had been officially engaged to the woman of his dreams, I then said to me-self, \_Stoick, mission accomplished by the very Odin himself!\_ Yeh \_don't\_ need ta hide that contract from Hiccup anymore\_. \_Best if just save it for when it is needed\_."

Vincent rose a brow, "What made you not tell them sooner?"

Stoick shook his head once again, "I don't know. I hid it in a place where I knew only Hiccup would find it. Perhaps Gobber as well, but my faith had always been in my son. After hearing the news, I simply just, \_forgot\_ about it."

"And now it has saved my daughter from a terrible fate." Vincent stood back up from his seat and placed both hands on Stoick's shoulders, affectionately shaking him back and forth. "I thank you, infinite times more."

Stoick half-smiled at him. Though when Vincent pulled back, he glanced down at the mirror, seeing how Astrid took her place by Hiccup's side on her house's dining table and Gobber serving them some beverages. Bertha was nowhere to be spotted.

When Stoick saw how Hiccup then stood up after a while and took Astrid's hand, guiding her back outside her house, closing the door behind them and walking with her to Stormfly's hut and sitting right by Toothless who was lying next to Stormfly.

Hiccup wrapped his arm around her and pulled her closer to him. Astrid chuckled and pushed his arm away before crawling over his

thigh, parting both of his legs wide enough for her to fit in. She sat between his legs, kicked her legs one over the other, and leaned back against his chest. Looking up at him and smiling innocently.

Rolling his eyes, Hiccup kept his smirk and draped his arms around her, holding her in before kissing her cheek and keeping his lips on her skin for exactly four seconds long.

Watching such, Stoick's eyes revealed a special kind of nostalgia and sighed aloud as they welled up in joy, "Watching them together, has always brought a special kind of joy within me, Vincent."

"Why so, Stoick?"

"They remind me of me and Val."

Vincent snickered, "Only the other way round."

Stoick nodded. Then allowed himself to frown. "This isn't over yet, Vincent, we will have peace for a while. A long while, thank Odin. But it won't seem to last as much as they hope it will."

"There is nothing, your clever boy and my strong daughter cannot do to survive." Vincent assured.

"I wish I had my hopes as high as yours, old friend...I truly wish to."

## 12. Sweet Strangeness

**\*\*Hey, I just wanted to use this chapter to thank all of you readers for your support and enthusiasm. I can't name every single one of you but you do know who you are and thats why I am thanking in general for being so nice and honest especially since you guys have proven to be really patient and allow me to proofread correctly and continue the story. Speaking of, I do wish to personally thank\*\*\*\***  
HarryPotterManiacWrites for if it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have the boost I got to spend nearly all month correcting all chapters. His/her review got my butt into some serious proofreading and I am very grateful! As much as with all the others that noticed some grammar "oopsies". Hehehe, I'll tell you guys what I've told everyone that privately messages me and is that I have that terrible habit of writing the chapters on my phone and I get so carried away that I update them as soon as I finish them and don't bring myself to proofread when I should. Plus, the phone corrector always gets its ways without me noticing. xD but thanks to that little boost I actually read and reread all chapters, changed a few details so if you reread them you might notice, if not then don't worry! ^o^ now you all know the reason why I didn't update this chapter sooner even though it WAS finished soon after chapter 11 was, and its because I promised I wouldn't allow all chapters be accumulated without proofreading. So, I encourage you all to submit honest and decent feedback for it is really helpful for future chapters and if anyone notices an "oops" on grammar please tell me. I did proofread this chapter but I am not perfect and something someone might have noticed that I haven't then could be quite helpful. I must say you guys are a beautiful audience and I couldn't ask for a better "first-story-strike" experience. It isn't easy but it sure as hel is

fun. ^\_^ Love! \*\*

\* \* \*

><p>"Are you sure you don't need me at the Academy or anywhere by chance today, Hiccup?" Astrid's hands rested on her front door's frame as she leaned her chest against it and watched how Snotlout offered his hand out to Ruffnut just a few steps away from Stormfly's hut. Ruffnut smacked his hand away in response, crossed her arms over her chest and then glanced away.<p>

Hiccup chuckled, stepping one foot backwards from her. "I'll be fine, Astrid. Fishlegs can take over the Dragon Academy for today and while it, you stay here and wait for your mom."

"I don't think sending me to the Academy today would be a good idea, Hiccup. Or any of us by chance." Fishlegs said while emerging from the house, having Astrid move aside so she could make way for his broad body to leave her house and stand just a few feet from Hiccup, gracefully munching on a piece of corn biscuits. "By the way, Astrid, these are delicious! Surprises me even to say it especially of anything coming from your kitchen."

Astrid glared at him, biting hard on her lips and fisting on his hefty arm. Making him drop two of the bread pieces he held on that same forearm. "Ow! I was just being honest!"

"Then go be honest someplace else." She hissed.

"Could you at least tell me how you got these?" Fishlegs asked.

"Is there anything asides from food and books that could possibly occupy your head?" She snapped.

"Of course there is! But those are just too private to be revealed."

"Um, guys? Mind going back to the original subject, please?" Hiccup asked.

"Right!" Fishlegs exclaimed, "As I was saying, I don't recommend anyone training today with dragons."

"Why not?" Astrid asked.

"Because there is a wedding coming up!" Fishlegs reminded her. "Not to forget, its not just any wedding we are speaking of, its the chief's wedding which is expected to be basically the best and most wanted event of the season."

"I can assure you, it is much more than that eh boy." Gobber butted in as he walked past the two still laying dragons along with Tuffnut. "Astrid's wedding to Hiccup has been hoped for since long before that compact was even signed. While some yearned to make Hiccup marry their daughters or Astrid marry their sons, others prayed for yeh two to finally tie the awkward knot ye've been holding on since kids. We could basically call it, the wedding of the year."

"All that only makes me want to run away in your place." Tuffnut commented as he leaned closer to whisper the words to Hiccup.

"Tell me about it..." Hiccup muttered more to himself, scratching the back of his head, wondering how exactly was he supposed to impress half the village with a wedding that was basically being prepared overnight.

He never thought people thought of him and Astrid this way. Thinking of such only made his face turn a sudden, stunning red as he averted his eyes. Trying not to give anyone any wrong ideas since all of this felt so foreign to him. So much, he barely guessed on how to actually face the facts that he wasn't fifteen anymore, that he was a grown man, chief, and soon to marry the woman of his dreams. It was...a lot to take in, indeed.

Astrid chuckled, smirked, and while her eyes enjoyed Hiccup's secret blushing moment, she said, "Then we shall give the village what they've been hoping for. Gather everyone and stop everything that doesn't have to do with preparations for tomorrow's evening event. One and half of a day without repairing what was lost from our last battle, won't hurt anyone. Let every possible Berkian help with what is needed to make an unforgettable wedding worthy of a great chief."

Hiccup's eyes found hers as he listened, not helping but to allow his lips seal and gift his ears to her words. Acting as if her commanding tone had also influenced him somehow. Though, he wasn't the only one. Valka, Snotlout, Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Fishlegs, and Gobber had gathered closer as well.

"How are we supposed to make it before tomorrow's sundown?" Snotlout asked with a brow raised.

Astrid filled her lungs with a deep breath as she glanced down at Fishlegs, "Once you've gathered everyone you can, divide them in large groups. Each group will have a different task. One, will be sent to take care of the food, for example. Those will hunt and fish if needed. Another group may be sent to take care of the decorations at the Great Hall. And so, and so. Allow the dragons to help with the gathering of wood and fish if needed. After the wedding, then we can start worrying about Osch and Billus's threat."

"And what about the cabin?" Ruffnut asked.

"I don't mind sleeping on the floor. I've done it before and could happily do it again." Astrid responded. "But since you insist on it; you, Tuffnut, Snotlout, Fishlegs and Hiccup will furnish that house as much as there is possible. I don't expect for it to be completely furnished overnight. It won't be. I know there are still things to get for that and we honestly don't have the time since the original plan was to be ready in three months, not one day. So fill up as much as you can."

All five of them nodded.

"And what will you do?" Tuffnut asked.

"I will wait here for my mother's return. Once I am done having my talk with her, I will try and assist you guys as much as Thor allows me to." Astrid responded.

"Sounds like an awfully fun day..." Snotlout muttered.

Astrid rolled her eyes at his sarcasm and then glanced over at Valka, who was now frantically rubbing on Toothless' neck. "Valka?"

"Yes?" The woman glanced back at Astrid, letting go of Toothless and allowing him to cuddle up by Stormfly's side.

"You and Gobber will make sure everything stays in order and everyone does what they've been asked for. If anything, bring me the news." She ordered.

Both, Gobber and Valka nodded.

Hiccup chuckled, walking up the steps to her and then smirked, "See? You wouldn't be a bad replacement after all."

His mocking little tone made Astrid playfully grin back at him and suddenly bring her fingers to his arm and then squeeze on the skin beneath the layers. "You're not allowed to retire just yet."

"Wasn't planning to." His smile widened as he leaned closer and pecked gently on her cheek before turning away from her and start walking towards Toothless.

Astrid then stood by her front door, watching how the gang walked away.

"Come on, bud, we gotta go now." Hiccup directed to Toothless once he got closer to his Dragon. Toothless lifted his head up from his paws and tilted it sideways in wonder, then laid it back down and closed his eyes once again.

Hiccup frowned, "Seriously? Toothless, we have work to do, let's go."

Astrid chuckled trying to understand what was going on with their dragons as she approached Hiccup to her Nadder's little hut and looked down at a sleepy Stormfly well comfortably laid right against the Night Fury's sides. "Stormfly seems a little exhausted now, Toothless. How about, you go with Hiccup now and as soon as she wakes up, I send her straight to you? That way she helps Hiccup and the others with all that's needed to be done."

"That's..." Hiccup glanced at her in realization, "...actually, not a bad idea..."

Astrid winked at him.

Toothless hesitated, then glanced at a now snoring Stormfly. Growling within, the Night Fury stood back on his four feet and began walking away.

Hiccup huffed, "Yak-head..."

"Stop it." Astrid whispered.

Hiccup shrugged, then started making small steps to follow Toothless. "The older he gets, the more stubborn he is."



"Like dragon, like rider." She teased.

"Very funny," He shook his head back and forth, "I'll see you later. Are you sure you'll be alright with your mother?"

"Of course!" She shrugged once then bit on her lips, "I am just more concerned on how's her mood. But, I don't think she'd ever be capable of harming me for disappointing or dishonoring her."

Hiccup seemed clearly uncomfortable with the thought of it, "Hm...just, come to me if anything, okay?"

She nodded, smiling brightly once again, "Okay."

Astrid watched him go for a few more seconds before her mocking smile would fade away and her heels turned her back into her house, closing the door behind her, sighing aloud and heading upstairs, to her bedroom.

\* \* \*

><p>Waiting for my mom's return was...well, I didn't <em>expect<em> her to come home so soon after what happened down at the beach earlier this morning. Yet, it was already past noon and I was still all by myself.

After the gang left, I managed to keep myself busy cleaning the house, ordering this and that, taking out the small amount of clothes I had in the bag I took with me to the docks. Emptying it on my bed. I also opened all of my drawers and tossed all my clothes on the bed.

I wasn't really willing to take much stuff with me overseas. I was pretty sure the Hollibusians wouldn't let me be layer-less. Who knows, maybe the dressing code they used at their village, wasn't exactly the same one we used here on Berk.

Hollibus was souther than the other islands near Berk. They probably even used a lighter kind of attire. So why would I bother taking so much from home?

This time, things were different. Yes, I was getting married. Yes, I had to move out from my childhood home, and yes, I had to start getting used to housing activities aside from my usual ones. But, I won't be leaving Berk for it. I won't have to stall my husband every now and then just to avoid him from touching me. Why? Well...because that husband we are talking about here, is the most amazing dragon tamer I have ever had the privilege to meet, the bravest boy in my life, the most unique kind of geek I grew myself so fond ofâ€”\_Hiccup\_, Horrendous Haddock the Third.

Too much love, huh?

Well, what can I say? I cannot be more pleased after knowing I was going to end up marrying him after all. It wasn't possible to ever make a contract with Billus, or any other man simply because there was another compact hanging in-between the world that revolved around us. And all, thanks to \_Stoick\_.

Seriously, if the man were still alive, I would undoubtedly run up to

him and allow my limbs be squeezed tightly to deformation by a hug.

Honestly, I didn't think being eternally bound to the arms of a man would feel so damn good. I always pictured it as a curse especially casted for women, punishing them into an arranged marriage with a man whose kindness was nowhere to be found.

Thankfully, that wasn't my case anymore. And that was all that truly mattered to me...for now.

I was clearing the empty mugs from the dinning table when the front door creaked open.

My mom walked herself in and kicked her feet against the door to close it. Both of her hands were busy holding a big white box and a smaller "gray" box over the white one.

"Finally, they are gone." She said, setting the boxes on the couch and stretching her back.

"You knew we were all waiting for you, didn't you?" I asked.

"Indeed I did. And I am not interested in having a bunch of young adults butt into my business."

"We just wanted to know the truth, mom."

"Not we, you." She corrected.

I shrugged, "Well, that too." Walking to the kitchen area, I placed the mugs in the sink and then circled the table until standing just a few feet from her.

Not really sure whether it was a good idea to simply ask her for answers right away, I then decided to deviate the subject "just a little. "Hope you don't mind. I came to get the rest of my belongings and transfer them to the Haddock home. I'll try not to delay so much and be a burden."

"Who ever said yeh were a burden ta me, Astrid?"

My shoulders relaxed and my lips found their way to lightly bite on my lower lip. Always trying not to actually make eye contact with her. "No one. Just all the things that have happened between us in the past few days. I disrespected you in many ways and also, the home we live in. It is expected and completely understandable that you'd still feel mad at me for it all."

Mother's breasts fell with the loud and strong sigh she released. Watching her steps as she approached me. "I cannot deny how disappointed I am. But, I'd be lying if I said I am not relieved."

My gaze found her eyes. Perplexed, trying to find logic behind the gentle words that defied her stoned expression. For a moment, I expected her to soon burst her lungs out and send me to Helheim for apparently mutilating her honor. But to my surprise, her hand slowly rose to my height and then found my cheek. Cupping it in her big, hard hand.

"Yer my daughter, Astrid. I could ne'er be truly angered with yeh. Yes, I wanted yeh ta marry a man of higher eminence. One that will assure our family won't ever starve. To have a safer village. But as much as I wanted eternal wealth for my daughter, I just realized that nothing would hurt me more than ta wake up every morning and think of how I am the one to blame for her disgrace."

Whatâ€"wait, was my mother \_truly\_ telling me all this?!

I'm confused...She \_never\_ speaks like this. Never accepts her wrongs and she never showed her soft, caring sideâ€" I even thought she didn't have one at all.

But, what I hardly understand is; that one moment, she is killing me with her stoned glare, probably cursing the day I was born. While the other, she is standing right in front of me, trying to convince me not to think wrong of her actions.

"Yeh have proven yer'self, not just ta me. But to the entire Village. Yeh showed us all how willing yeh are to sacrifice everything just for the sake of yer people, and family honor." Her thumb moved across my cheekbone, down to my jawline and then her entire hand stroked on that very same cheek, "Yes, I knew of the contract. It took me long and torturous days of deep thought. I wasn't sure whether to take it or not. I asked myself, various times what would yer father do in this kind of situation. But I must admit, I was never patient enough to receive an answer from the gods. The decision I made, originated from my greed. To desire for your infinite wealth so every living organism that circled us, would glance with irrevocable respect. Forgetting what was truly important. Ignoring what yer father would have to say if he were still among us."

My eyes itched. But my hands were frozen at my sides. Soon, I realized that if I didn't get a tight hold of myself, I'd soon be feeling salty drops rolling down my cheeks. "What would daddy say?"

She smiled, her eyes warm and kind. "Many things. One, would be that yeh do not deserve ta be treated like some kind of merchandise. That yeh are worthy of all good fortune, as long as it came from honesty and made whole heartedly."

I chuckled, "That does sound like him..."

"Aye, he was always proud of having a girl. I wanted ta give him a son. Thinking he might reject us both once you came to our world, he surprised me by spoiling you until the end of his days. He always trusted you to become the jewel that would always restore our family's reputation if ever be broken. He knew ye'd become tough, and he was right."

I took in a deep breath, letting it go really slowly. Making it last before opening my mouth to say something in response, when she rested her other hand on my shoulder, gripping not-so-strong at it. "Astrid, I know we've had a bad week. But I now blame nothing on you. I still, do not agree with your union with the Haddock boy, but unfortunately, I have no other choice but to desire you find kindness in all that you meet."

Was she...\_blessing\_ my marriage?

"...Mother, Iâ€"

"Hush now, I have something for yeh." She pulled back, turned on her heel and walked to the couch. Beckoning at me. I followed. Standing just a few feet behind her. Watching in silence as she moved the small gray box from the big white one and setting it aside.

Wondering why wouldn't she let me at least try and find words to respond to this shocking moment. Bertha removed the box's lid and let it fall on the floor. Pulling what seemed like a white tunic from the box.

"What is that?" I asked.

Her lips curled up into a faded grin while her eyes admired every inch of the item in her grasp. "It is a dress Gothi had well protected."

"For whom?" I rose a brow.

"\_You\_."

My eyes widened as I took a better look at the dress in my mother's hold. It was a traditional white, off-the-shoulder long sleeved dress. The waist band took place on the lowest of its waistâ€"Which is actually best known as an A-line type of dress. At the very center of the waistband, there was a bronze dragon emblem. Simple looking, yet undoubtedly stunning.

\_Was that for me? To wear, tomorrow at my wedding?!â€"\_I thought\_.

—

Then, my head shook back and forth, "Wait, where did \_that\_ come from, anyway?"

"I told you already. Gothi was keeping it safe until the right moment came. Now is it."

"Um...mother, I am still confused."

Bertha chuckled aloud, moving to my direction, trying to visualize my body in it. "Long ago, yer father and I promised one another that we would do as needed to make you a wedding gown worthy of all of your virtues. This may not be much, but it is meant to be a gift."

"And why didn't I see that before leaving overseas?"

"Because I thought you'd be dressed under the chief's request of style. So I didn't bother to ask Gothi for the dress since I knew you wouldn't even want it."

My shoulders relaxed, sending her a wave of appreciation through my eyes, "You might be right. And, thanks mom. The dress \_is\_ stunning."

Truth be told, I was glad she saved the dress for this. She was right, though. I would probably be mad at the entire universe for

allowing fate to cross that nasty path on my way. Now, it was all different. I wanted it to be tomorrow night already, and I also knew it would be a memorable night, not just for myself. But for everyone that appreciated their chief and his new wife.

Wife...

That word in my thoughts sounded so strange. I wonder how would it sound when spread with real words. And loud ones.

My fingers landed on the fine fabric. Feeling its softness, smiling warmly at the thought of how nice would it be to actually wear it.

How would I even look in this?! I have never used a dressâ€”in my entire life. Will I even truly enjoy wearing it? What would Hiccup think of it when he sees me tomorrow night?

"One more thing." Mother interruptedâ€”thankfullyâ€”my suddenly troubled thinking and allowed me to carefully hold onto the dress as she turned back to the couch and grabbed the smaller, gray box. "Yeh know, it is tradition."

"What is?" I asked.

"The husband must never be the one to remove his new wife's kransen in the intimacy of their bedchambers. It is the duty of the bride's attendants while preparing her before the wedding." She began to explain, "But this time, things will go differently since we are speaking of the chief's bride. In this case, the chief will be the one removing his wife's kransen. Symbolizing the official end of her maiden days and a fresh, new start of fertile and bearable opportunities."

All the blood in my body flushed instantly up to my face. Feeling my head hot and heavy while listening to my mom reminding me how everyone in the entire village will know what will happen between Hiccup and I after saying the famous 'I do'.

They should even change the terms for such... I mean, it's not really intimacy if you have witnesses making sure your Kransen is removed by your husband on your wedding night.

Good thing they just watch the amulet removal and then part on their own ways. Otherwise, I don't think I'd be willingâ€”or be ableâ€”to even touch Hiccup for the entire evening. Oh, Hel no.

"â€”Yet, you have been using your Kransen ever since you turned twelve. It looks specially good on you." Mother continued.

"Um...yeah, I got pretty used to it. Feels more like part of my armor than some kind of maiden symbol." I admitted. Having to clear my throat so she wouldn't find out how uncomfortable this conversation was beginning to make me feel.

She nodded once, "And to maintain that armory image that so well suits you, I got you this."

When she presented the contents of the box to me, her fingers pulled out a thin forehead-band, made out of dark-brownish leather. "\_Not\_ a Kransen." She pointed out, then placed the band back in the box. "\_That\_", will be stored in your new home until your first daughter is old enough to use it. This one I give you, will only become part of your everyday attire."

I nodded in silence agreement before chewing on my inner cheeks, wondering what should I say in response. Before I could even open my mouth to ask her anymore questions, my mother placed her hand on my back and hurried me toward the staircase, "Off with you, now! You must finish packing so we could take yer belongings to the Haddock home before the sun sets."

It wasn't after I had closed my room's door behind my back with a light kick, that I released the most heavy breath I remembered I had been holding.

What just happened downstairs with my mother, was it even \_real\_?

I have never seen her behave like this before... At least, not with me. All so caring and tender. I cannot deny that at times, she shows some kind of care. But today, it was evidently \_different\_. Such strange sweetness I could never dare change for all the gold buried in the depths of the wildest oceans.

Sighs, I guess I will never get to understand Big-Boobied Bertha's mood-swings and mysteriously shifting humors.

After placing the dress on my chair, by the desk, my eyes studied every detail of it. My arms absently moved up my sides, a little upper until I felt like I was tightly hugging myself. Biting on my lips while feeling the chills go down my spine. Wondering whether it was truly a good idea to move the wedding ceremony to a closer date. Things with my mother, hadn't always been perfect. After all, my mother is best known for her ruthless personality. Yet, after listening to her, just a few seconds ago, maybe it would be a good idea to share some more nights with herâ€"at least to try and make things completely right between us.

No... Not a chance. I've been waiting for this moment of my life to come for years. I cannot simply say no to Hiccup now. Besides, there were many other things to take care of. We just need to learn how to balance all of them.

"Now, I just need to finish packing." As I led myself to a messy bed, I grabbed the large, empty bag on the end of it, opened it and soon began to fold the leggings when my ears shut everything around me in silence, focusing on a specific-\_unfamiliar\_ sound coming from downstairs.

The sounds were distant and barely audible. Soon, I found myself standing still, holding a black pair of leggings half folded in my hands. Discovering how the less noises around me, the better chances I'd get to listen to the odd sounds coming from beyond my room doorâ€"

"Lay down your head, and I'll sing you a lullaby. Back to the years, of loo-li-lai-lay. To bless you with love, for the road that you go...\_"

Fingers traveled down the wooden door frames, finding the handle and gently pulling the door a little further back. Making sure my ears weren't making things up when they heard a poor tuned voice sing the only lullaby I have sworn had been long lost and forgotten in this shameless family.

"\_May you sail fair, to the far fields of fortune. With diamonds and pearls, at your head and your feet. And may you need never to banish misfortune, may you find kindness in all that you meet...\_"

Bertha's body stiffened for a quick moment at the sound of faded steps descending from the upper floor. She slowly turned on her heels, and while gripping on the dry and old cloth in her hand, her eyes watched astonished as I halted my feet on the very last step, grasping on the railings and simply staring back at my mother.

Bertha's lips parted, brows curled up in disbelief before gulping in a breath and continued singing anyways; "...May there always be angels to watch over you...\_"

I licked my lips, drew in a breath and continued for her in the same delicate tone: "...To guide you each step of the way...\_"

Mother: "\_To guard you and keep you safe from all harm...\_"

Us both: "\_Loo-lee-loo-li lai-lay\_."

"You remember." Bertha whispered.

"It's my favorite song." I responded. "You used to sing to me every night. And whenever I cried. But then, you just stopped doing it and became much more strict."

"One must lead children into greatness, not weakness. Singing lullabies ain't leading you nowhere." She seemed amused, all of the sudden. Then, her feet guided her closer to me, reached her hand out and rested her palm on the coldness of my cheek. "But now, you will wed a man seemingly worthy of your attributes. Even though it has been quite difficult for me to accept such barbarity, I have no other choice than to wish you the best of luck...and of course, bless your days. I might no more sing you lullabies, but surely, you will do so to your own heirs. The fruit of your strength and bravery." Her hand fell from my cheek and went down to the lowest of my stomach. "But, above all, product of your love with the Haddock boy."

"I will certainly enjoy singing them to sleep with a lullaby as charming as this one you have gifted me."

Bertha chuckled. Playfully poking on my abdomen, "Foolish girl. Tis' is not just a song to send children to dreamland. It is a prayer a mother makes to bless her children's path. Best way to wish them good fortune without seeming so weak and worthless of respect."

I slowly moved my head side to side, raising a brow. Making Bertha laugh humorlessly, as she noticed how suddenly puzzled my expression looked. "Yer great-grandmother, used to sing for yer grandmother. Yer grandmother, used to sing to me. And I, to you."

"And I suppose it will just be natural of me singing to my daughter." I teased.

"And son, as well!" Mother pulled away. Drawing her hand back and widening her eyes as she scanned her daughter from head to toe. "You must do yer best to grant a son to the chief! Daughters won't do much compared to sons."

My brows curled into a tight frown. And what exactly am I, then? A Troll?

This little wonderful moment just started feeling awfully strange lasting so long. Now it just had to be ruined. Not surprised, though. "I am pretty sure Hiccup would agree with whatever comes, mother."

"Perhaps. But how are you so sure about such?"

"Because, Hiccup is much more humble than what you'd think." I chuckled, keeping my frown and pushing my chin up in determination. "But, I honestly don't want to talk about this now. When the right time comes, then we can think about heirs and whatnot. For now, the wedding goes first, then preparing the island for whatever it is to come."

"Remember, Astrid..." Mother called as I made her watch how her daughter turns on her heels and decidedly starts climbing the stairs back up, huffing within. "Yeh have all rights ta plan yer future. But yeh cannot decide whether it will turn out to be exactly how yeh expected."

That last statement felt as if someone had just taken a tight grip on my braid and yanked it backwards. I knew she was probably right. Hel, up till now, nothing had gone as planned. Firstly, I was supposed to get married in three months. Then a stranger from another tribe desires to take command on my precious future and ends up declaring war instead of peace. And now, I am just a few long hours before saying yes to my very first option for marriage.

Though my feet had halted their way halfway to the bedroom, I shook my head back and forth, thinking it would be completely hopeless to start refuting her. When I finally entered my room, my hands moved the door closed behind and then leaned my body back against it. Neck extended backwards, crashing the head against the door and closing my eyes, taking in a load of cold oxygen through my nostrils and releasing it through them as well.

"I knew happy and peaceful times were just temporary."

\* \* \*

><p>"Astrid, wake up, dear." Not receiving a fast reply only made Valka release a soft chuckle before pulling her hand from Astrid's shoulder and taking the hem of the bedsheets and gently throwing them over her neck.<p>

"We should let her rest." Valka said, studying her sleeping image. "It is only natural that she feels exhausted."



"The Hoffersons are never exhausted, Valka." Bertha spat back while leaning back against the wall of Astrid's room, arms crossed over her chest and a bitter expression as she watched how Valka grabbed two full bags and moved them closer to the door. "Besides, she cannot miss dinner."

"I understand she hasn't eaten that well in almost a week. But I believe her body yearns for sleep more than any other thing and just so you know, Bertha, Astrid might be a Hofferson, but she is also a human being." All the while, Valka's responses were sweet, and all whispers. Not really daring to make eye contact with Bertha just yet. She just kept moving all of Astrid's bags—which were four in total—closer to the exit of her room and eyeing the spaces around her, making sure she wasn't leaving anything behind.

Apparently, Astrid had finished packing everything before crashing to sleep since when Valka came in, the bags were already full and resting by the bed waiting to be taken away.

"A strong human being." Bertha corrected, "And strong ones don't rest."

"You sound like my brother-in-law." Valka growled. Not really helping the bitter taste on the feeling affirming Bertha and Spitelout might have more things in common than ever expected.

"Negative. I have my own housing rules and theories. And he has his." Bertha said.

"As hard as it can be to accept, you and Spitelout have a lot more in common on how you treat your children than you could ever get yourself to imagine." Valka commented.

"And who are yeh to confirm how I treat my daughter?!"

"I am...no one." Valka's voice faded away. Reflecting how Bertha's words felt like sharp spears tearing her skin apart. "But, if we are guiding ourselves into an argument, then I will have to ask you to hold yourself until we abandon this room. The least I want is to let Astrid think we have never agreed with one another."

"You give no orders in my home." Bertha hissed.

"Not an order, a favor." All of the sudden, Valka's words ended up as low as barely audible. Hoping this time, Bertha could at least make an effort to understand how important it was to at least try and grant Astrid a little peace. Even if it was only in her dreams.

Bertha pushed her upper lip in disagreement before kicking her ankles to walk out of Astrid's room.

Valka watched her leave and just released a heavy breath before glancing back at a still deeply sleeping Astrid. Yes, indeed was she tired. It was well reflected on her closed, swollen eyes and slightly dropped mouth. Her head rested on her arm, her body laying on her left lateral decubitus.

It relaxed Valka's insides to know things were starting to finally take a better place for Astrid and Hiccup. She knew the reason why

Astrid's skin seemed much paler than a few months ago, when she first met her. Astrid was hardly taking good care of herself thanks to all the things that occupied her mind. Some well deserved sleep would definitely do her good.

"Valka..."

Just when she thought she could finally leave the room, Valka's feet halted their way as soon as her ears heard Astrid's soft, numb voice call out to her. When she turned to face the girl, she saw how Astrid didn't even bother to move from her laying position. She just watched the older woman with heavy eyelids. "Yes, dear?"

"Let me help you. I just took a nap." Astrid mumbled.

Valka fixed her lips into a warm grin, "No need. Gobber is waiting for me outside, with Cloudjumper. Their help is more than enough."

"But..."

"As I was just telling your mother, you need the rest. Worry no more. I will let Hiccup know you won't join him for dinner." Valka cut Astrid's words off in the kindest way. So much, that Astrid began feeling slightly guilty for initially feeling unsure of leaving Hiccup all alone with this unexperienced woman while mourning his dad and going through so many things at once.

Astrid didn't answer to any of that, though. She just sighed and allowed her eyes to close for just a few seconds. Then opened them again and looked back at the woman grabbing the two remaining bags.

"I will take all these to our home and organize everything for your arrival. Only a few small things will be needed for the days you'll spend at the cabin." Valka informed, "Then, I will be back first thing in the morning, for your maiden bath."

"You can use one of those bags." Astrid said. "I doubt much is needed. After all, Hiccup and I will stay at the cabin for two days minimum."

"Seven. I told him to stay longer." Valka corrected.

Astrid blinked in surprise, "Are you sure about that?"

Valka chuckled, "Yes. I believe you two need some good days on your own before having a third person living with you."

Astrid's eyes warmed their stare as she nodded once, "Thank you, then."

Valka shrugged a shoulder, "Same happened to me and Stoick, though. He wanted to spend a few days away, overseas. But I wanted to stay and take care of his father. In the end, he pleased me by staying. Then I realized a few days to begin my marriage all alone with my husband would be better."

"Why?"

Valka's lips curled into a guilty smirk as her eyes moved around the room, "Well, you can't do the same things you do when alone with your husband, than being amongst other people. It becomes a little uncomfortable overtime. The energies aren't exactly the same and the mood either."

Astrid's cheeks flushed. Imagining just exactly what Valka might mean by that. Which, wasn't at all so far from the truth. It was \_just\_ what Hiccup had been trying to tell Astrid.

The girl then chuckled and shook her head back and forth, "Yes but, what I truly meant was, \_why\_ are you doing all this? I mean, we get along just fine, but still. I'm marrying your son. One you haven't seen for twenty years. Why are you so happy that now it won't be just \_you\_ and \_him\_?"

Valka remained silent for a few seconds, as if intending to find the correct words. Then, she responded with a soft, "For unknown reasons, I find myself very fond of my son's relationship with you." With that, she then released a pleasant giggle and shook her head while turning to open the door, "Sweet dreams, Astrid."

"Night."

\* \* \*

><p>"I dislike the way you speak ta my daughter, Valka."<p>

They were now in the living room. Just Bertha and Valka. The front door was wide open and there was only one bag at the front steps. Gobber had taken the first three and left them at the Haddock home.

Bertha was standing by the dinning table, both arms crossed over her chest and her face stoned serious. Watching every single move Valka made as she descended from the stairs one last time.

"It is impolite to listen to other people's conversations." Valka said.

"In my house, I may do what I desire." Bertha spat.

"No doubt on such, Bertha."

"Are you mocking me, Valka Valhallarama Haddock?" Bertha gritted her teeth, smacking her fist on the table beside her.

"How could I?" Valka said as calm as usual while directing herself to the front door. "Honesty \_isn't\_ a sin."

"Yeh \_are\_ mocking me!" Bertha couldn't help it, her words were forced out from her mouth, sounding very much louder than a groan.

"Bertha, please, don't take it all the wrong way. Astrid and I were just \_talking\_."

"Too sweet if yeh ask me."

"Well, I won't simply start yelling at her for no good reason." Valka

pointed out.

"Yeh are too soft with her, with yer own boy." Bertha shook her head as she continued, "No wonder why he grew up so worthless."

This, made Valka frown, "Now, hold up, Bertha. Don't insult my son on my face. He has proven to be much more than just a boy who prefers reading than fighting."

"Rubbish!"

"Rubbish, is everything you have done to make Astrid believe she needs to please every single bravery wish from the village in order to gain your respect and appreciation." Valka spat back.

Bertha was taken aback by Valka's words and rose a brow, "What are yeh saying, woman?"

"What I'm saying, is that I don't know Astrid for long enough, but I have known you ever since we were children and I know you'd do anything just to get a good image for yourself. It was very clear to the entire village that Astrid lives to be appreciated by her mother and all the others from the very moment she stepped on Osch's ship this morning. Willing to give up her freedom in order to guarantee Berk's safety." As she talked, Valka slowly made her way toward the unconvincing widow. "These, are actions that blind you enough not to ever notice that this, has been consuming your own daughter's life. Let us all hope, that one day, you don't just wake up regretting the day you pushed your daughter hard enough to allow her life be swept from her."

Bertha was about to say something, but Valka furrowed her brows for a quick second, then relaxed her entire expression, her voice lowered and her shoulders relaxed as well, "You know what, I am glad my son is marrying her tomorrow. I am more than just happy to know she will have him a lot closer than ever before and you know why? Because I have seen how they relieve each other's burdens without hurting anyone. Also, that way she won't have to come every single day to a mother that always glances at her with disagreement flooding from her eyes."

"And just who are you to assume all that?" Bertha's tone was dead. But her expression remained humorless.

Valka sighed aloud, exasperated. "Listen, I want and am trying as hard as I can to be part of my son's life. And more than half of that life, involves Astrid. Which means I also should look forward into liking her. I want to figure out why did Stoick appreciate her as much as Hiccup babbles of every single day. She is the only thing he talks about when we are alone. She and Toothless. Not even his father had such a special part of him reserved. I must then understand that my son, is already a man who is just about to get married to someone completely opposite of him. That his bed, will now be occupied by someone else. I need to accept that. And I am trying to. Even If I do not deserve the tittle of a mother just yet. All I am saying, is based on what I've observed these past few months I've lived here. I might not talk so much throughout the day, but I am a very skilled observer. I've come to conclusions no one has ever thought of and yet, I always keep them to myself. Don't use the fact I haven't been on my son's life for twenty years against me, Bertha. Because being

always on Astrid's spine, and causing her to make drastic choices that might either disturb you or please you, doesn't make you \_any\_ better than I as a mother."

"Get. Out. Of. My. House. Valka." Bertha's words were paused. Stoned and dry. So was her glare. A little sharper, and Valka might even feel them harming her soul. But she was well satisfied with what she told Astrid's mom. Bertha deserved to have someone that would slap some sense into her about how she's been indirectly treating Astrid.

It was all clear to Valka now. Nearly \_all\_ Astrid did, from training, to making violent and puzzled decisions concerning the Hollibusian's visit, was all leaning to how deep down, she wanted her mother's eternal appreciation.

Without another word, Valka drew in a deep breath, bowed her head gracefully and turned on her heel. She grabbed the last bag from the way and closed the front door behind her. Hoping only that at least a small amount of what she had told the Great Swordfighter, would have stayed in her head and somehow serve for something positive in their nearby future.

But what Valka, Astrid and all the others didn't quite understand right now, was that Big Boobied Bertha's humor, was much more mysterious than they thought.

\* \* \*

><p>Midnight was probably passing by now. For the skies were as dark as the insides of a cave and only the a few stars stood out from the darkness. No moon was seen. At least not from Astrid's window view.<p>

She had woken up just about ten minutes ago and still didn't dare to move from her bed to do other things. Except, undressing herself and slide a tunic on. This one was light blue, the fabric was very thin. Almost as thin as to allow her breasts be seen through it if she didn't wear her bands. And that was the thing, she \_wasn't\_ wearing anything beneath the tunic.

Should she care? No.

She had brought a hand up to her eyes and rubbed her knuckles against them when she heard a sudden crack coming from her window.

When her head titled to the side, she found a lean figure trying to make itself inside, stretching a leg in first and then pushing itself in before falling on its butt on the floor.

The figure groaned in silence, then stood back up, rubbed on its buttocks and then leaned to glance down the window before pulling back, taking a grip on the curtains and pulling them to seal all possibilities of moonlight into the room.

The figure's steps made their way to the bed, where Astrid had now closed her eyes and simply stayed still. Faking her slumber as her bed was suddenly claimed by another body.

The smell of charcoal filled her lungs as soon as two cold lips

crashed against the paleness of her temple. "I brought you some food." He whispered.

"How'd you know I wasn't sleeping?" She asked.

Hiccup chuckled, "If at this time of my life, I still don't know my lady's ways of fooling others, then I have grave problems."

Astrid couldn't help but to allow a small, weak smile form on her lips. Though she didn't say anything else. Just allowed the feeling of Hiccup's hand travel up and down her arm.

Glad that it was dark enough for him not to notice her lack of decent layer-wear, that she was numb enough not to even move from her spot at the very center of the bed, that she didn't need to wait until the next day's evening to see him...she felt glad.

"I thought I wouldn't see you until tomorrow." She mumbled.

"Yeah, well you aren't supposed to. I was hoping to do the same thing I've been doing for two months." He whispered.

"What is?" She asked.

"To find you deeply asleep." He responded.

"What do you do to a sleeping maiden?"

Hiccup released a soft laugh at her previous question. "Nothing. Just watch her sleep and caress her if I can."

Astrid's eyes opened once again. Trying to find at least a fraction of his expressions but she got nothing due to the darkness in her room. She then moved a little to the side, making some more place for him. Her hand soon took a gentle grip on his forearm and pulled him down to her. As if asking him to lay down. But he didn't quite seem to catch her message. Since Hiccup just slowly allowed himself to lower his head down to hers, draping the same arm she was holding over her and plant his lips on her glabella. Sliding down to her nose, until encountering her lips.

She pushed her lips against his own and then he brushed the whisper against her skin "Are you hungry?"

"Sleepy." She answered. With the same drowsiness of before but with a little of desire added to it. "Will you stay? Rest for a while."

"We have eternity to spend, resting together." He whispered back. Kissing her lips once more.

Astrid didn't answer to that. She knew he was right. She knew, that after the next day's sundown, she won't have anymore reasons to ask him to stay a while longer simply because she will have him resting by her side every single night life allows them to. Which was much more than what they could have ever asked. But, she also knew this was the last sleep she was allowed to have as a maiden, the very last night she will ever spend by herself.

Should she feel glad, or frightened?

She didn't know. And honestly, her mind was just too tired to think about such. All she wanted, for the moment, was to fall off to sleep in the arms of her beloved husband.

"How did things go with your mom?" He asked, still brushing his lips against hers before pulling back enough to lay beside her.

Astrid took in a deep breath and turned to throw an arm over his body, laying her head on his chest. Taking in a strong dose of recently burnt coal from his clothes. "\_Strange\_."

Hiccup rose a brow, "What do you mean?"

"She came in and said how she would never be eternally mad at me. Then sang Loo-lee-lai-lay."

Hiccup was taken aback once he heard her. "She \_blessed\_ our marriage?"

Astrid blinked her eyes open once again and moved her head up to him, "You \_know\_ about the lullaby?"

"Of course I do. My dad used to sing me to sleep with it when I was a kid."

"She said it was sung to daughters." Astrid recalled.

Hiccup chuckled, "Its a prayer. Astrid. There is no gender assigned when making prayers."

Astrid's brows relaxed at once and she moved her head on his chest to a more comfortable position. "Right..."

"Something tells me, that your chat with your mom was quite surprising."

"What makes you feel so sure about that?" She asked.

"Well, you aren't complaining about anything and you just said she blessed your future without someone having to tell her to." He explained.

Astrid smiled not really helping it. He really \_did\_ know a lot about her and her relationship with her mother. Which was great considering now she wouldn't have to explain so much. "Well, it \_was\_ surprising. But the good kind. Now I may think she actually wants me to have a choice."

"Still, I don't believe she's been quite honest with you lately." Hiccup said. His voice sounding a little deep.

"We've already discovered that, Hiccup."

"No." He chuckled "What I mean is that she has done everything in her power to keep you from knowing the truth all along."

"Care to explain yourself, please?"

Hiccup sighed aloud, "Today I went to Gothi's hut. Just to ask her if tomorrow we will have good weather for the wedding when I got curious

into asking her for information about that Achlys fruits you took in the other day. The point is, she said she had something to tell me and mentioned that Bertha had forbid her words about the contract. That word got to her that you had fainted twice thanks to the Achlys and that she was never called to attend you simply because Bertha knew Gothi would tell us about my dad's doing. She said she knew the parchment wasn't destroyed and that it just needed to be found."

"And your point is?" Astrid rose a brow, starting to feel puzzled up.

"Don't you see it, Astrid? Bertha didn't want me to take you to Gothi because she knew Gothi would mention the contract in order to get you out of the arrangement with Billus."

He'd be probably right. Hiccup was sure of it. But Astrid couldn't find reasons to start another useless argument with her mother when things between them had resulted surprisingly smooth that day.

So she just sighed aloud and began to absently trace small shapes on his chest. "I don't expect less from my mother, Hiccup. She has always done everything in her power to get what she wants. But after what happened today, with her, I have no other desire than to forgive her."

Hiccup blinked in surprise. He had been hoping to hear and see some of Astrid's encouraging self soon enough, but he didn't really expect it to come from her mother who had resulted to play a huge part on their previous problems. How many other things did Bertha do in order to keep Osch interested in having Astrid as his son's wife?

No one knew. And up till now, the only thing they all had to do was to try and forget all those things in order to welcome their chief's new future alongside his new wife. Still, Hiccup couldn't help but to ask his bride, in a soft whisper, after kissing gently on her head, "May I ask, why have you forgiven her so easily and so soon?" He knew very well she had made the right choice. He'd personally encourage her to forgive Bertha if ever needed simply because she was Astrid's mother. But he still felt unbelievably curious to know Astrid's reasons to forgive Bertha in no less than a day.

Astrid delayed about four to six seconds in responding. She took in a deep breath and slowly let it go before moving to get comfortable closer against him and finally whispered, "Because she blessed our marriage."

Might not be a strong reason. Might not even be a reason at all. After the scare they had gone through? Nothing could mend the small damage already caused. But to hear such words from her own mother, only meant enough for Astrid to leave things as they were and simply take in her blessing.

Nothing, meant more to the young maiden than to have her own mother wish her good fortune and kindness in her marriage to Hiccup. Will this nice treatment ever last longer than hoped? She didn't know. And at the moment, she wasn't allowing such wonders occupy her mind. Bertha had finally accepted Astrid's marriage to Hiccup...that was what truly mattered to her. To know her mother won't just start verbally attacking Astrid and Hiccup's union for a while.



At least, she hoped.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Song used as The Famous Blessing Prayer Bertha sang in this chapter: "Sleepsong" by Secret Garden. <strong>

### 13. One Body, One Soul

By the time Astrid woke up that morning, Hiccup was already long gone. He probably left a little after she had fallen asleep by his side. They didn't talk much after their little conversation about her mother. Whether Bertha deserved or not to be forgiven, was all up to Astrid and apparently, the girl had some heart left in her after almost losing everything precious to her.

She imagined her mother still sleeping when she went downstairs and thanked the gods above for such. She wasn't in the very merry mood for someone stopping her from exercising that morning.

When Astrid's eyes opened that morning and noticed Hiccup's absence, she didn't delay in getting dressed and catch a nice run through the woods before anyone would force her into an early meeting with a bunch of married women that would give her advice and tell her how to please a man. Which, was all just part of Viking Traditions. But, she needed the exercise and she was more than grateful that her eyes had opened a few minutes before sunup. This way, she could have all the spare time to clear her head and warm up her entire body.

Bringing her axe up and back over her head with both hands, she smashed the shiny iron against the broad tree in front of her. Making small bits of wood fly down to the ground and even over her body. One, even landed on her nose and as she shook her head and blew her lips up so it would fly from her face, her hands were wrapped once more around the axe's haft, kept her fingers still, and with one deep inhale, her arms pulled back the axe's head from the damaged trunk.

Allowing the axe fall to the groundâ€"still being heldâ€"while her eyes remained on the damage she just created on the tree trunk, her chest rose and fell uncontrollably, craving for some fresh oxygen before she let go of the axe from one hand and held it still with the other as she stepped closer to the tree. Bringing that same free hand to touch on what her eyes were staring so closely atâ€"Billu's name engraved on the wood.

"Dare get even an island closer to Berk, and your head will roll down these streets...by my own hand." Her mutters were almost impossible to spread since she had been gritting on her teeth. "I will show you how no one is crazier than a Viking who is willing to give it all for their people."

"Talking to trees again, I see."

Astrid's head snapped to the side, to see Ruffnut walking out from the woods and directly to her. The female twin dusted on her skirt and then placed a fist on her hip and tilted her head to the side in

curiosity. "May I ask \_why\_?" she asked.

"I wasn't talking to myself. You are hearing things." Astrid cleared her throat, took in another shaken-up deep breath to settle her chest down and then waggled her shoulders. Trying to relax them. "What are you doing here, Ruffnut?"

Ruffnut shrugged her shoulders. "I wanted to take a walk before everything goes crazy in town." she then chuckled and pointed at Astrid with a studious glare, "Which reminds me, shouldn't you be at home, preparing for your \_maiden\_ \_bath\_?"

"I was exercising." Astrid quietly said. Removing all the dirt from the axe's blade. Rubbing her thumb on its upper helve. "Nothing wrong with that."

"Uh, it \_is\_ if we are talking about \_your\_ wedding, which in theory, starts in no less than twelve hours."

Astrid couldn't help but to release a slight giggle, "And since when do \_you\_ speak in-theory to me? Or, anyone by chance?"

Ruffnut shrugged her shoulders and rolled her eyes, along with her head. "Never. I just copied the words from Fishlegs. I saw him little before coming up here."

"Everyone's awake now?"

"Well, most. The only one I haven't seen yet is Hiccup." Ruffnut responded.

\_He must still be asleep.â€" Astrid thought.â€" \_It's been a tough week for all of us, I couldn't just blame him.\_

"Babe!" Snotlout called as he came from the darkness of the woods behind Ruffnut, holding a big basket in both hands. "Why did you leave me like that?! Can't you see this thing is really heavy?"

"I thought you were as strong as a giant." Ruffnut said, shaking her head back and forth, showing shame.

Snotlout gagged at the sound of her words, "I am! I just...I mean...Uh...You shouldn't be running off by yourself. What if something happens to you?"

"Hate to break it to you, but I can take care of my own butt." Ruffnut said.

Snotlout opened his mouth to say something when Astrid stepped in, throwing the axe over her right shoulder and holding it still as she tilted her head to the left. "What do you have there?"

"Huh? This?" Snotlout asked showing off the basket to Astrid. "Oh, nothing. Just some fish Gobber asked us to get for tonight's wedding."

Astrid stood on her toes just to take a better look at the basket. "Uh, Gobber could eat all those and still remain hungry, Snotlout."

"How ungrateful of you." Ruffnut said as she frowned, crossing her arms over her chest. "Those are exclusively for our table. Yesterday, we fished more than enough."

Astrid gritted on her teeth, gripping on her axe's helve, "So, are you saying that you spent the entire noon fishing instead of following my orders?!"

"Relax." Snotlout said, "We did what you asked us to. But we also went fishing. After leaving the house ready for your honeymoon, of course."

"Yeah, I mean, we only had to move the new bed inside. You have nothing else." Ruffnut pointed out. "Oh, and the rest of the bedroom's furniture was a gift from my parents and the Ingermans."

Astrid lowered her head. Though she kept her frown as she thought of how right they might be. She knew the house wouldn't be well furnished overnight. So she just had to learn how to suck it in. "Thanks,"

Before she could even open her mouth to say something else or even ask for a report on how things went the day before, Snotlout growled aloud and dropped the basket to the ground making the small amount of water in it splash out as the lid flipped open. "I don't get it! Why would you want to dedicate the rest of your days to a legless worm, when you may have someone way tougher and bigger that could smack you senseless in bed whenever he wants to?"

Astrid was taken aback by that. Her brows curled down into a tight frown, "First of all, Hiccup is not legless. Second, worms actually don't have any legs. And third, it's not you the one who decides when and where to have sexual contact with someone. It's something that should be made to please both. Not just one." Her lips then traced a devious grin before leaning her body a little forward and said "...Besides, whats the matter with being gentle? You never know how exciting it might get."

"I thought you liked it rough." Snotlout muttered.

"How would you know?" Ruffnut asked, already seeming quite irritated as she snapped on her own knuckles. "Have you smacked her senseless before?"

"No! I wish..." He mumbled. Then chuckled, "Because I know my ex-lover pretty well. And I know tough girls enjoy tough men way better. I mean, how can she possibly turn down five thousand pounds of boulding splendor?" Snotlout then fixed his furry vest and waggled on his shoulders, stepping two steps closer to an already irritated Astrid. Bringing his arms halfway up and kissing on both of his biceps.

"Snotlout, boulding, is still not a word." Astrid said.

"It is to me!" Snotlout yelled. Then fixed himself to a calmer pose, going back to grinning at her, "You know, you are still on time."

"On time, for what?" Astrid growled.

"To ditch Hiccup, what else? I know you still love me, Astrid. We can kidnap Hiccup and say he was eaten by a Changewing or something. Then, you can marry me instead of him."

"You see, this is why Ruffnut hardly tolerates you." Astrid pointed out, signaling at a female twin that was very much more distracted with her hair than with anything else. "You can't just settle yourself with one woman."

"Gah! I'm a Viking, a real one. What else did you expect?" Snotlout hissed.

"Ugh," Astrid's shoulders dropped in surrender. "I won't even answer to that. We better get back to town before someone else notices we're missing."

Snotlout's behavior didn't catch her by surprise, in fact, they all knew Snotlout's attitudes were usual. What she didn't expect to see, was him offering himself to her once again after stopping invading her personal boundaries ever since they were eighteen.

Back, when things between Hiccup and Astrid got serious, Snotlout had stopped intending to win Astrid over. Which felt like a relief to her considering his stalking went from ridiculous to completely suffocating.

Walking their way back to town, Astrid's mind drifted to the soothing thought of what will happen once she abandons her home, all dressed and ready to begin a half-distinct life from the one she is so used to. In a few hours, she won't be called Ms. Astrid Hofferson anymore. No. She will be, Mrs. Astrid Hofferson of Haddock. Or simply, Astrid Haddock. "Lady Chief sounds better." She allowed her lips to spill the unauthorized words while feeling her cheeks flush themselves in a rebel red shade.

"I think you are enjoying yourself a little too much, Astrid." Ruffnut teased, wiggling her brows at her leader.

Astrid chuckled and punched the girl's arm—"who actually laughed at the reaction instead of groaning in pain.

"It's the excitement. What can I say, I'm overjoyed." Astrid admitted.

"If only my princess Ruffnut would say things like that at our wedding." Snotlout sighed the words out.

"I would, if you wouldn't be such a petticoat chaser and stop hitting on an almost married woman in my face." Ruffnut responded. Shrugging both shoulders carelessly. "Which is why I am highly considering accepting Fishlegs' invitation."

"What invitation?" Astrid asked. Watching how Ruffnut rubbed on her chin as she prepared herself to answer.

"Oh, right. I didn't tell you, did I?" Ruffnut asked, "Fishlegs asked if I could be his date at the wedding."

"What did you say?" Astrid asked.

"Well, first I said I would if I ever got bitten by a red snake and my life depended on it. But now I think I may be reconsidering."

"Ruff, you do realize nothing you just said about the snake bite has any sense. Right?" Astrid mumbled.

"So what? He understood what I meant." Ruffnut shrugged.

"That's not fair! I want you to be my date to the wedding!" Snotlout yelled in desperation. Closing his eyes shut and opening them wide again in disbelief.

"You don't actually need a date to go to the wedding, Snotlout." Astrid reminded, grinning deviously. "You could just go and watch how everyone else dances and eats with a companion."

"Yeah, that doesn't make me feel any better, Astrid. Thanks." Snotlout growled.

Astrid laughed at his reaction. Making Snotlout tighten his brows together in fury at her but didn't say anything else other than curse in mutters the moment when Gobber asked him and Ruffnut to catch a few more fish. Since if it wasn't for it, they wouldn't have found Astrid on the first place.

"Has anyone seen Stormâ€"?" She didn't even finish her question when her eyes caught his body sitting on a boulder near the big statue of Stoick near the Great Hall's entrance. "Hey guys... why don't you go and set what's left for the ceremony? I'll catch up later."

"Uh, no way." Ruffnut complained. "You have to be home for your maiden bath. If anyone sees you out here, they will blame me for it."

"I promise I will be home before someone notices. Just give me a few minutes." Astrid's lips moved. Emitting the words needed to convince both Vikings that accompanied her back to public grounds. But, her body slowly moved ahead and her eyes stabbed on the figure sitting with both legs crossed over the rock. His head was extended backwards, apparently gazing at Stoick's statue.

None of the two dared to say something back. They just watched how Astrid slowly led herself to the skinny boy on the stone. Soon after, Ruffnut shook her head and then turned to face Snotlout, walking behind him and pushing his body toward Hiccup's house, where they knew Gobber was waiting for them.

As Astrid got closer to the boy, she could hear his faded voice become louder by the minute. Though when she halted herself right behind him, his voice stopped being heard by her ears. He took in a deep breath and let it go slowly and loudly.

"Hiccup?" She whispered. Dropping her axe to the ground, and stretching her hand out to him, resting it on his shoulder. Feeling how his arms flinched by the surprise. "Are you alright?"

He didn't turn to look at her. He just lowered his head and nodded twice. "Yeah. I just came to see my dad before Gobber locks me

indoors for the day."

Even though his words were meant to sound \_at least\_ with a little humor in them, they had nothing at all. Which made her think he was lying.

Moving to lean closer to him, Astrid moved her other hand and rested it on his jaw, turning his face to the side as she tilted her head to take a better look at him once she made him face her. Gasping as soon as she noticed two swollen eyes, tears rolling down his hot-red cheeks and a bright red nose. It was when she realized he'd been crying way longer than she'd hope for a hurt young Chief. The look on his face, told her he'd been releasing tears at \_least\_ since last night. Probably a little after she'd fallen asleep, right?

But, why? What were the motives for his sudden sad mood?

"Hiccup, Iâ€"

"Don't mind me, Astrid." He cut her off. Shrugging her hands from him and immediately wiping his face clean while hopping from the stone, walking around it and stopping in front of his bride. "I was just granting my dad a small visit. Like I said, before Gobber locks me indoors." he chuckled, trying to build up a smileâ€"which failed.

"Which reminds me, shouldn't you be on your maiden bath?" He asked.

Astrid frowned and turned her back on him, crossing her arms over her chest. "You know, it gets really annoying when nearly everyone that bumps into you, brings up the maiden bath-thing."

Hiccup couldn't help the small laugh he released at her sudden reaction. He tilted his body to the side, trying to find her face. "It can't be \_that\_ bad."

Her eyes widened. Then her body turned just enough to draw an arm back and punch on his gut. Making him kneel and nearly barf out the small amount of air he could take in. "Oh yeah?!" She argued, "Just imagine yourself as a girl for once and try to see if you could stand the fact everyone will know \_when\_ your purity will be given away for the first time."

"Well, I believe it would be quite embarrassing. But don't ever ask me to picture myself as a girl again since I doubt I'd be as lovely as you are."

Astrid's lips didn't resist themselves and stretched into a warm yet grateful smile though it didn't last long as she leaned to help him straighten himself and gently took his hand from his gut so she'd rub it herselfâ€"apologetically. Remembering how he was pained when she came in. Wanting to know if he was truly alright. Guessing that it might be better if she just made sure he was okay before leaving to her house and not see him until the ceremony.

\_Ceremony\_... was it the right thing, to have one when he seems so down?

"Um, you know, Hiccup...If you aren't feeling well, we can postpone

the wedding untilâ€"

"No, Astrid." Hiccup interrupted her. "I said, I'm okay. Nothing will stop us from celebrating our union, \_tonight\_."

"Butâ€"

"I just allowed myself to get lost in the mood while saying how I wished my dad was here to witness this day and bless our marriage. Remembering how much I miss him brings the tears out of me without me even wanting them to." As he talked, his hands found hers and removed them from his body. Encasing her fingers in his palms and bringing them up to his lips. Brushing the words against the skin of her fingers as he continued talking, "My dad once told me, that burdens are meant to be shared with your most loved one. Not to carry them on our own. \_Nothing\_ will stop me from marrying you tonight, Astrid. We've waited long enough, don't you think?"

Astrid didn't even know what to say to that. If he wanted her to believe his tears were just a matter of time to cease, then she \_will\_ believe it. Though, she still wasn't sure celebrating while feeling so down was the right thing to do. Hiccup seemed to believe otherwise and he wasn't wrong when he asked her if they've waited long enough for the wedding. \_Too long\_, if you ask her.

All she could do, at the moment, was to melt her eyes into a much more delicate glance over at him and slowly stretch her lips into a tiny smile. Nodding her head twice, Astrid allowed the sweet breeze caress her skin and blow on her bangs as her eyelids slowly draped over her eyes the moment Hiccup's face got closer to hers.

"Oi! What are yeh two pumpkin heads doing here?" Their moment was suddenly disrupted when Gobber came out of nowhere and burst himself between the couple, tearing them apart and pushing Hiccup further away. Then pointed at them with his interchangeable handâ€"which was now a hair brush. "Neither of you should be here." He turned to Hiccup, "Yeh should be at home, resting those embarrassing black sacks outta yer eyes!" Then turned to Astrid. "And you! Yeh should be on half of yer maiden bath! What in Odin's hairy back are you doing here, eih?!"

He didn't even let the two Vikings spread word, for he chuckled aloud, grabbed Astrid's axe from the ground, threw it back at her, and then started pushing his good hand against Hiccup's back so he would start walking. "Move it, puny chief! Or there will be no wedding."

"Aaa-Alright Gobber, I'm coming." Hiccup tried to get the man off his back as he walked. But he couldn't. So while trying to move his back, protecting it from his mentor's mistreat, he allowed himself to laugh.

"Yeh laughing eh!? Do ya think this is funny?" Gobber began, pushing him harder, "Get yer ass back home before I change my mind and find Astrid another suitable groom."

Although Gobber's actions seemed quite serious, his tone was far from such. He was actually holding back the desires to laugh at how Hiccup moved side to side under his pushing. Shrinking his head in his shoulders and bringing his hands up to his head, as if protecting

himself from a beast.

Astrid found it quite amusing. Though when Gobber turned his head to her, he pushed his chin up at her, "And you! I better not see ya until tonight. Go home."

She frowned at himâ€"playfully. "Hey, why does he get to rest all day long and I get a bunch of old ladies?!"

"Because I wouldn't want ta make love to a tired and off husband. At this rate, he won't even be able ta get a single moan outta you." Gobber responded. Making Astrid and Hiccup's entire faces turn an evident bright red as she realized he was actually raising his voice just to make sure she'd hear him since he was already about seventeen to nineteen feet from her. Guiding his apprentice and young chief to the Haddock home, who actually yelled "Gobber!" back at him, so the man would at least try and stop embarrassing them.

Astrid didn't even dare to say something back. She just turned on her heel and ran down the hill until she reached her house, opened the door, rushed herself in and pushed the door closed. Not really noticing how many Berkians actually witnessed this little moment by Stoick's statue, but hoping not many did.

Gobber was right. In theory. If neither Hiccup nor Astrid received enough rest, then it was expected their marriage wouldn't be even near consummation. But the thought of it just made her furrow her brows and shake her head back and forth in denial. "Hel, no. Even if I feel as if an entire mountain has collapsed over me, I won't turn out on what the night is supposed to have for me after the ceremony."

"Glad to hear you speak so positively." Valka's voice startled the girl. Making her snap her head up at the woman that leaned all relaxed against the dining table. Her arms were crossed over her slim chest and her head was tilted to the side, showing a very pleasing expression.

"Valka!" Astrid blurted, trying to get a good hold of herself as she forced her suddenly heavy feet to move forward.

This day just couldn't get any worse?â€"she thought. "What are you doing here?"

Valka rose a surprised brow, "What, don't tell me you just forgot about your maiden bath?"

Seriously, this day should be called 'Astrid's\_ \_maiden bath day'\_ instead of 'The chief's wedding day.'

"Could we just, not mention it anymore? I've had enough for the morning. It almost feels as if the world just wants to mock me for being a virgin." Astrid said. Bringing a hand up to her temple and finally succeeding at getting away from the front door just in time before it would blast open by a fire-shot. Making both women inside slightly jump further away from the entrance when a young, long-haired blonde jumped inside and brought both arms up in triumph.

"Ruffnut, reporting for duty and ready to save the day!" Ruffnut



cheered. When Astrid glared to catch what was moving behind Ruffnut and through all the smoke surrounding her, she saw Barf and Belch moving their heads side to side, taking turns in peeking on what was going on inside the house.

"What on Earth do you think yer doin' Ruffnut?!" Bertha's voice thundered through the house as she rushed herself down the stairs, holding an empty bucket of water in her hands. "Yeh could have turned my house on fire!"

"But I didn't." Ruffnut defended herself and dusted on her clothes before starting to walk further in.

"May I please know what are you doing here, Ruff?" Astrid asked.

"Me? Ruffnut pointed at herself, "Well, I came to rescue you!"

"Rescue \_me\_?" Astrid asked, "From what?"

"From a very torturing day." Ruffnut answered. "Trust me, you \_don't\_ want to be stuck all alone with a bunch of married and old women teaching you how to please a man."

What would \_you\_ know about any of that?" Astrid asked.

"My mom told me. She will be part of your morning despair so, yeah."

\* \* \*

><p>Unbelievable, but true. I just had to admit Ruffnut's warning wasn't even a little far from the truth since when I was brought up to the washroom, I wasn't even allowed to undress myself. Plegma was waiting for us in the washroom and as soon as I got in, she rushed herself to me and began stripping my clothes off. As much as I tried to remind myself that these actions were just part of Viking traditions, it never took away the uncomfortable feeling that was feeding on my lack of calmed mood.<p>

When I was guided by her to the tub filled with water and all sorts of colorful and delicate flowers, Gothi had extended her spear to me and allowed me to hold onto it as I carefully stepped into the tub.

Valka had taken her place on a seat behind me, undoing my braid with great patience. Plegma sat on the floor, by my right. Holding my hand in hers and scrubbing on my fingers with a tiny brush. Ruffnut sat by my left, scrubbing the fingers of my left hand with another little white brush. Ingrid Thorstonâ€"Ruff's motherâ€"was at the end of the washroom, sitting on a chair, sewing on what seemed to be the dress my mother had gifted me. Probably giving it some designs.

There was a big pile of heated stones not so far from Ingrid. A bucket filled with water by its side and a big spoon dipped in it. The stones only emitted enough heat into the room to make it feel more like a sauna.

This kind of event was meant to be at a \_bath-house.\_ Which was

located near Frigga's River. But due to the massive destruction our last battle left behind, we never had the chanceâ€”or timeâ€”to rebuild a bath-house. So Hiccup had to authorize everyone who wished to get married, to have their own washroom turned into a sauna in order to proceed with the tradition of washing their maiden status away.

My mom? Well, she was in the washroom alright. But she never really touched me. She just stood there, by the door. Supervising everything that happened. She had me very well confused. Last night, she was being very sweet and caring to me. Few days ago, she behaved like a solid rock. Now, it felt as if she wasn't even there.

Bertha moved from her spot at the door and walked toward the pile of heated stones. Sparkling some water on them so they could emit some more heat. After doing such, she walked out of the room and just...\_disappeared\_.

"Did Bertha bless your marriage, Astrid?" Valka asked.

"She did." I honestly responded.

"She doesn't seem like it." Ruffnut muttered.

"Ruffnut." Ingrid called, glaring down at her daughter in a scolding way.

"Sorry." Ruffnut sighed and continued scrubbing on my fingers.

"Bertha has always been very emotionless." Valka commented. Still running her fingers slowly through my curls. Not even bringing herself to touch my Kransen. She just...\_left\_ it there.

"Has she?" Ruffnut asked. Looking up at Valka and ignoring her mother, who was actually sending her an ugly stare.

"Indeed." Plegma answered first. "Even as a child, she never showed any affection towards anyone. Not even her own father or grandmother."

"At least, not in public." Valka added. Moving just to grab the bucket full of water by her side and bringing it to her breast-level.

Ruffnut and Plegma placed the scrubbing brush on the floor and stood up. Plegma then grasped on my shoulder and gently moved me forward. Ruffnut placed her hand on my forehead and slowly pushed my head backwards so that Valka would then pour the warm water in the bucket over my head and hair.

"What makes you so sure about that?" I asked them all. Still with my eyes well closed. Enjoying the calming sensation of warm water over my tense body. Beginning to forget how unusual it was to have so many people joining me for a bath and allowing the relaxing feeling of tradition take over me.

"We know your mother since we were children, Astrid." Ingrid said. "No one has ever seen her showing affections to \_anyone\_."

"You do know your parent's marriage was an arranged one, right Astrid?" Valka sweetly asked as she placed the bucket back down on the floor and waited for me to move my head straight again.

I just nodded. Then opened my eyes and ran a hand over my eyebrows and eyelashes, removing the drops of water that invaded my sight.

As I felt Valka's hand once again sliding down through my hair, I heard her continue speaking, "Little after Hiccup was born, we all heard word that Bertha was with child. Though Vincent had always been a man with a very stiff personality, he always tried his best to make her smile. We never witnessed him succeeding at such, but there were rumors that he was the only one she ever treated with so much care behind the walls of this house."

"When your father got terribly ill, I came to bring some herbs for him." Plegma began while moving to grab the lavender scented soap and scrub my arm with it. Then my chest. Around the curve of my breasts and back up over my collarbone. "I asked her if she needed comfort."

"What did she say?" I asked. Intrigued by the story.

"I never saw two pair of eyes so cold in my entire life. She never responded to my question and just made me leave in silence. Before I could even say my goodbyes, she murmured something about allowing nature take its course and then shut the door at me." Plegma continued.

"How rude." Ruffnut said. "I believe she suffers from severe bipolarism."

"It's called bipolar disorder, Ruff." I corrected.

"Ugh, whatever. Same shit." She muttered, crawling to the heated rocks and sparkling some more water on them.

Ingrid sighed aloud, her eyes focused on an invisible lint on the dress. "When Vincent passed away, everything turned worse than before she had married him. All she wanted was a better status than the one she believed she was in."

"What do you mean, mom?" Ruffnut asked her mother, sitting right in front of her with both legs crossed. Knee over ankle.

"What I mean is, that all she cared about was wealth and commodity. As soon as Vincent Hofferson died, his brother Finn came in to help with everything she needed. He basically took his brother's place at the Hofferson's house. He took care of Astrid as she grew older until he was banished by Bertha herself for dishonoring the family." Ingrid explained.

"You mean after the Flightmare thing happened?" Ruffnut asked.

"Indeed. After that, Bertha's attitudes became even colder." Plegma continued for Ingrid. "Word was spread that once, around Astrid's tenth birthday, she tried to convince Stoick into allowing her to send Astrid away and have her marry a prince from an eastern island. The man didn't seem to like the idea and didn't even give her the

chance to finish her request."

"The chief got furious enough to prohibit Vincent's only daughter to abandon the island without his consent. Declared himself the only man with the rights to have the last word on anything concerning Vincent's daughter and when Astrid proved herself to be of adequate age, he kept her as busy as he could with training just so she wouldn't spend so much time in a house full of dead humor." Ingrid finished, directing her words more to Ruffnut than to anyone else in the room.

I frowned, "Why is it that I'm feeling as if you guys are telling a scary story to a bunch of kids?"

"It isn't a scary story. It is the truth." Plegma corrected.

"Well, it feels like a story to me and even though some things make a little sense, others don't." As I spoke, I stretched my neck side to side and dipped both hands into the water. Resting them on my thighs as I glanced at the two women that decided to apparently unmask my own mother. "I know she is a woman with a small-to-none amount of feelings in her, but as she did things that could show how mad she might be with life, she also did things that have surprised me greatly."

"Oh, yeah?" Ruffnut asked, "Like what exactly?"

"Well," I cleared my throat, "Yesterday she blessed my future with Hiccup and she gifted me that dress you are holding there." I brought my chin up, signaling the dress still laying on Ingrid's lap. "She even gave me a forehead-band to combine with my armor. To me, that's just more than enough considering her personality. I can't just expect so much from her."

"It is really hard to believe Bertha has ever showed any affection toward anyone, how do you expect us to believe these actions of hers aren't just part of something mean she might be planning to do to you?" Ruffnut's statement made all the women in the room—including myself—raise our brows in confusion at her.

Then, I shook my head back and forth, "Even if you do have a point there, the only mean thing she could ever do to me is to kill me. Which I know she wouldn't be capable of. I was told she couldn't bare anymore children after me."

"That is true." Plegma said. "She once came to me, desperate because she had been trying to conceive. I took her to Gothi and she informed us that Bertha's reproductive system had become weak after Astrid's birth. She only wanted a son so desperately"

I frowned again at them. For a moment, I felt as if Plegma was only talking to all the others, "I am still here, you know."

Even if all they said was true, I still had to force myself to believe that there was still some good in my mother's intentions. I mean, she couldn't possibly be a person with manic depression, could she? As I earlier said, her actions could be very much confusing to me, but I was satisfied enough with her blessing. Her behavior last night, was one I could never bring myself to forget even if it was the first and last time she would ever touch me the way she

did.

Perhaps the fact her mother died just a few days after giving birth to her, that my grandfather abandoned her when she was old enough to sustain herself, my grandmother going to sleep one night and never find her way back to a good and new sunrise, my uncle's banishment, my dad's death and even my own marriage to a man she didn't even want to have as a son-in-law from the very beginning; were just small reasons to make her be the way she is. I'm not truly sure if I should trust in her good mood or simply be as careful as I have always been around her. All of this, was eternally confusing. Maybe this is just one of those subjects in life where we just need to wait and see what time has to say about it.

To be honest, I am mostly glad to get married tonight. That way I may distract myself and focus more on my husband and all the things needed to be done before our apparent upcoming battle.

Yes, that would be best. To try and ease my mind and concentrate in thoughts that could actually bring some good to my mood. I just, hope her heart could be mended, someday...

\* \* \*

><p><em>Nothing<em> could make him feel more nervous than how he actually felt. Standing like a complete stranger on a lonely corner of the Great Hall's dais. Allowing his teeth mutilate the already chapped skin of his lips. Averting his eyes, unable to keep himself still for just one second as he watched how the building got fuller by the minute.

"Get a hold of yer'self eh, boy!" Gobber said as he shook the groom side to side with his good hand, "It's not like yeh will give a long speech. All ya have ta do is hold a sword up, exchange rings, drink from the wine, kiss, and off to party!"

"I doubt it is as easy as it sounds." Hiccup said. Moving from Gobber's grasp and seeing if he could find Astridâ€"or anyone from the gang.

"Oh, it is. Trust me." Gobber responded with the amount of confidence Hiccup gravely desired to have.

The boy moved his head to glance at his mentor, frowning at him, "Have you \_ever \_been married before?"

"Nope."

Hiccup rolled his eyes, not really knowing what to say back when the doors suddenly banged closed as a sign that everyone must be in utter silence and ready to receive the bride.

"What are you two doing hiding like two sheep?" Valka asked in harsh whispers as she appeared behind Hiccup and Gobber's backs, grasped on their shoulders and pushed them ahead to their respected positions. Gobber had to stand right between the groom and bride. Since Stoick wasn't there to declare and approve Hiccup and Astrid's tied knot, Gobber had to do it instead.

Soon, both big doors opened and all heads turned to see the bride

walk in. Hiccup's eyes seemed to have paralyzed when he saw her in. Only admiring the strange image that claimed to be his new wife and lifelong secret crush. She was wearing that beautiful dress that exposed her shoulders and neck, but conserved her arms warm inside two delicate sleeves. Her curves were perfectly traced and the dress' ends rubbed over her bare feet as she walked on a hall draped in white flowers of five petals as women delicately threw some more over her feet as she passed by them. Symbolizing good fortune in her marriage and fertility—mostly fertility.

Golden and long curls rested over the skin of her shoulders that her dress left oh-so-carelessly uncovered. The very first time Astrid had her hair outspread—in public. Only two thin braids that were tied together at the back of her head, to hold a small blue flower of five petals. Her curls kept one or two colorful flowers tangled in them. To give her image a more delicate touch. Her cheeks were rosy, and as she got even closer to Hiccup, they just dared to darken.

Her hands were empty. Halfway to her husband, her feet halted and turned on her heel to face her mother, who was standing right behind her, holding a sword in both of her hands.

Music while Astrid walked was composed of a harp, strings, violins, flutes, tambours and tambourines.

A special melody then took place as soft and slow as it was originally created a little more than twenty years ago. As soon as Hiccup's ears recognized the strange song he had only gotten to appreciate once in his life, his eyes widened and found his mother's figure standing just a few feet from him.

"Mom...I—" He began, but she quickly went up to him and silenced his lips by placing a finger on them.

"Hush, son. It is my gift to you and your bride. I am sure your father would also want it to be this way." Her whispers didn't really stop her from releasing one—or maybe two tears of joy as she leaned to her son and kissed his forehead before pulling slowly away from him. Hearing his voice when he whispered his gratitude to her before taking her place back by Plegma's side.

Though, Valka couldn't really resist humming the song to herself, allowing her eyes to well some more at the memory that had so stubbornly caved in her thoughts. Remembering how it was the night of her own wedding, the very first time Stoick came up with the song and surprised her in front of everyone else. Now, it was her son that was to enjoy that sweet melody, with his wife.

"\_I'll swim and sail on savage seas, with ne'er a fear of drowning.  
And gladly ride the waves of life if you will marry  
me—hmm—hmm—hmm—hmm—And love me for eternity.  
La-ra—la-rala..la-ra-la—.-To love and kiss and sweetly hold for  
the dancing and the dreaming. Through all life's sorrows and delights  
I'll keep your love inside me—"

Hiccup didn't know the song. But he did catch his mother's humming and murmurs as she sang it to herself even if she was just a few feet from him. Truth was, he pictured the moment when he got the privilege to see both of his parents singing and dancing said song. The memory was vivid in his head, making his lips trace a pleasant smile,

relaxing all of his muscles for once.

Then, just when everything seemed to run just as smoothly as expected, all fire pits and torches suddenly began threatening to fade away, having everyone gasp and murmur all alarmed to one another.

"What's happening?" Fishlegs asked from a corner by Hiccup's left side.

"It's Snotlout's ghost. Quick, everyone...run!" Tuffnut said with both eyes wide open.

"I'm right here, you idiot!" Snotlout yelled, smacking Tuffnut's helmet with a mug of ale, spilling its content over Tuffnut's body and around him.

"Guys, calm down. It's just the wind." Hiccup hissed at them.

"Hate to break it to you, Hiccup, but the doors are closed. Which means there can't be any wind." Fishlegs said with a shaky voice as he pointed a trembling finger at the doors.

"Not helping, Fishlegs." Hiccup muttered. Taking in a deep breath and preparing himself to yell for Toothless when the fire pits and torches inside the building emitted a stronger fire than ever seen before. Their lighting made everyone inside suddenly crouch down and cover their faces in protection until the lighting volume came back to a normal one.

On either side of the chief's seat, two "invisible to the eyes of a human" figures appeared.

"The hel was that?" Astrid asked while glancing around, trying to find reasons as to explain what just happened.

"We should have used another way to get in, Stoick. We scared them all stiff." Vincent's soul whispered at his chief.

"Aye, but no one got hurt, or did?" Stoick's ghost responded without even the slightest sign of worry in him as he nodded at his old friend and began walking to take his place by Hiccup's side. "What matters, is that we made it before the good part comes! Now I get to see my son get married, from up close. And you get to see yours!"

"Yes, but it isn't the same as when you are alive." Vincent shook his head.

"We are alive! Alive in spirit! And we are also in their hearts." Stoick cheered.

"Still."

Stoick frowned at his friend's sudden sense of apparent pessimism. "Listen ta me, Vincent. We promised ourselves we would come in and witness our children's wedding from up close. Cheering their mood, watching how they grant themselves the loving life they very well deserve! Do not tell me you are regretting our actions."

"\_Not a chance, Stoick. I am more than pleased to see my daughter from up this close. It's not the same when you are looking at her through a looking glass\_." Vincent responded.

"\_Then erase that depressing expression of yours. I want to enjoy my son's wedding while I'm still in a good mood.\_" Stoick said while shaking his head and stood right next to Hiccup.

As no one seemed to know how to answer to Astrid's question, she just took in a deep breath and shook herself back together.

"Let's move on, Astrid." Eret said as he placed a hand on Astrid's arm and helped her stand back up. He let go of her once she began walking toward Hiccup once again. Understanding that even though to him, she looked just as beautiful as how she does on a normal day, now he had to force himself to forget how his eyes daringly pictured her every single night, in his dreams. Ever since he saw her completely layer-less, back at the wilderness. Forcing his heart to believe that from this night onwards, she will permanently become his chief's eternal companion.

Vincent's ghost, stood right by Astrid's side and placed his hand on the girl's slim back. Her feet halted abruptly at a sudden feel of warmth on her back. Making her mother almost bump into her.

Astrid's lips parted. As if ready to allow words to spread. But none was released. Only a loud gasp was. Her eyes moved to the side, to see if she could find any reasonable explanation to that unique feeling on her. But she found nothing. So she shook her head once again and continued walking. Being just a few feet from Hiccup and Gobber.

When she reached the dais, she stood on her assigned place, right in front of Hiccup. Bringing herself to smile as warm as her lips ever allowed her to. His hand found hers and laced their fingers together. He couldn't tell her everything he thought of herâ€"for now. But it didn't take away the fact of how anxious was he to have her all to himself so he could spill out all the words of excitement his pounding heart was screaming up to his brain. To tell her how strange it felt to him that she looked more like a delicate Valkyrie than a shield-maiden, yet how wonderful it felt at the same time.

Hiccup, was wearing dark brown trousers, a dark green tunic and a dark browned cloak made out of bear skin. His facial hair wasn't as evident as other Vikings his age, but the shadow of it was still there, perfectly tracing along his jawline. His hair seemed a little longer from the last time Astrid shaved his beard for him.

Turns out, she smiled as soon as she saw him this way. Simply because she had teased him several times on how it would itch or tickle on her whenever he tried to kiss her. But now she recalled that all these past few days, while they were going through hard times and not having the chance to think about facial care; she never truly noticed that he hadn't shaven. She just, allowed herself to get rolled up in the heat of the moment.

The dark shades under his eyes had faded. Not completely, but they were almost gone. Which revealed how much of a great rest he had gotten during the day. How lucky...



"Dear and beloved people of Berk! Here, we are. Standing all together to witness the sacred union of our young Chief Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, with our precious shield-maiden Astrid Hofferson. To bless them with great fortune for the future roads that Odin might lead them to. As tradition, we shall become witnesses of a simple, yet memorable moment by allowing both parts exchange their token of loyalty and absolute truth along with that of guardianship and justice" As Gobber talked, loud enough for almost every being in the room to hear him, he turned to Hiccup and nodded once at him. Then turned to Bertha and nodded once at her as well.

Hiccup caught the sign. He gasped in silence and moved his hands down to take a hold on his sword's handle. Glanced back at Gobber and then looked back down at the sword, drawing it out and stepping back enough to point it at Gobber. His mentor beckoned for Fishlegs to walk in. The boy did. Carefully placing a golden chalice in Gobber's hands.

When Gobber's eyes dropped to what his hands were holding, he chuckled aloud. Displeased. Then pushed the chalice back to Fishlegs' hold. "Not that, boy! The other item."

"Oh! Right, I forgot the order." Fishlegs apologetically mumbled and turned to rush himself back to the twins. Which were silently laughing before receiving an angry glare from Fishlegs. The buff boy took a small box from Tuffnut's hands, opened it to verify its content and then rushed himself back to Gobber.

Gobber took the box in his hands and opened it. Taking out a small golden band and sliding it into the sword's point.

Astrid bit on her lower lip until savoring her own blood as she watched how Gobber slid the ring Hiccup had made for her, through a sword's sharp point. She had given her ring to Ruffnut that morning, who handed it to Gobber since it was needed as part of the ceremony.

Hiccup moved the sword as carefully as he could to Astrid's direction when he felt two strong hands wrap around his hands and support his hold on the sword. Making his eyes widen at the sudden warm feeling on his hands. When his eyes moved down to his hold on the sword, he saw nothing. What he didn't know, was that his very own father, was actually standing right behind him, supporting his hold on the sword so it wouldn't fall off his grip.

Astrid took the ring off the sword's point and waited for Hiccup to slide the sword back where it belonged. In its scabbard. He then moved a step closer to her and took the ring from her hand, sliding it in her annular finger.

Astrid did the same thing for Hiccup. From offering Gobber the sword her mother had just given to her, to sliding Hiccup's brand new golden band in his annular finger. Then, Fishlegs took a hold of Astrid's sword and backed out of the way as Ruffnut walked to stand right on the opposite side of Gobber, holding a long-white ribbon in her hands.

After such, Gobber made them drink from the wine in the golden Grail as a symbol of how their lives are bound to share all kinds of sorrows and delight. Hiccup had the first sip, then he guided the cup

to Astrid's lips and she took in a good amount of it.

The cup was being held by both of their hands. Hiccup's over Astrid's as Ruffnut proceeded to tie their hands to the Grail. As Hiccup and Astrid, both said their vows to one another.

When Hiccup parted his lips to spread the vows he didn't even know how to begin with, a sudden whisper in his ear allowed words to simply float from his lips.

"I, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, take thee, Astrid Hofferson, to be my lawfully wedded wife. Allow me, to be your faithful partner in sickness and in health, in good times and in awful ones. In joy, as well as in sorrow. To carry each and every of our burdens together. To continue loving and cherishing, until death do us apart."

Her chest ached. Her heart was to blame for such barbarity and disrespect. It was banging so hard against her ribcage, she could hardly keep herself breathing correctly. When Hiccup finished his vows, his eyes blinked in surprise. As if he couldn't believe what his lips had just spread. Of course, he would never imagine that his words were whispered to him by the voice of his very own, beloved father.

Now everyone's eyes shifted to the bride. And all of her body seemed to have frozen stiff. Astrid wasn't a woman that was used to hear so many sweet words on one single bite—or even say them. It should be grossing her out. As a Viking as fierce as she was, it must be grossing her out. But surprisingly, it wasn't. It only made her heart thump harder and louder inside her thorax.

Then, a low whisper in her ear—just as with Hiccup—forced her lips to part open once again and allow words to be spread. "I, Astrid Hofferon, take thee, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, to be my lawfully wedded husband. Allow me, to be your faithful partner in sickness and in health, in good times and in awful ones. In joy, as well as in sorrow. To carry each and every of our burdens together. To continue loving and cherishing, until death do us apart."

Finishing said vows felt like a huge relief for her. It was well demonstrated when she dropped her shoulders forward along with a loud sigh that made Hiccup release a small yet meaningful laugh.

"With this knot well tied," Gobber began, "By the power invested in me, by our Young Chief Hiccup, I now declare you Chief, and wife." He then grinned at both of them, speaking his following words low enough for only the lovebirds to hear him, "Now do what you know you both desire so much."

"Gobber!" They both exclaimed with two hot-red faces and widened eyes that looked more like four pairs of huge pearls instead of eyeballs. Causing Gobber to burst out laughing.

"Go on! What are yeh two butt-heads waiting for? Yeh won't get much privacy tonight if that's what you are thinking of." He said.

"Even if that's true, I would appreciate it if you didn't push it." Hiccup muttered while waiting for his mother to untie the knot and

release his hands from Astrid's and the Grail.

As soon as their hands were free, Astrid deviously smirked and took a tight grip on the brooch of his cape and pulled him brusquely to her. Crashing their lips together. His eyes widened as he was taken off guard but then allowed them to close and simply get lost in the mood. Being encouraged by all the cheers around them to snake an arm around her waist and pull her closer against him as brusquely fast as she just did to him...

For old time's sake.

\* \* \*

><p>They didn't stay long after the wedding, at dinner. However, they <em>did</em> share a few moments of dancing and laughing together and with friends. They even allowed Mulch begin painting a portrait of them. Received congratulations from nearly every being that saluted them. It almost felt sickening to both of them.â€"well, sickening for Astrid and rather suffocating for Hiccup. Since neither of them was used to these kinds of approaches from their people.

Ruffnut was spotted near Fishlegs during the feast. They didn't dance together. In fact, Ruffnut even threw a plate of fish at Fishlegs when he tried to feed her as if she was a child to him. But she did remain close to him, apparently to steam Snotlout even more than how he actually was.

Now, Hiccup and Astrid were standing right in front of their newlywed bed. Hiccup's hands rested on her shoulders, his eyes well locked into hers as his fingers slowly trailed up the skin of her neck, dancing on her cheekbones and up to her temples until reaching the Kransen that had adorned her head for years and that now, was meant to be removed by her husband.

Astrid took in a deep breath, letting it go as slowly as she could just to calm herself as much as ever be possible while hearing her heart pound loud and unbearably hard against her chest. Seeming to race Hiccup's heart as well since he could have sworn his heart had just threatened him to jump off his chest and join hers for once and all.

They were both nervous, indeed. Especially knowing so many eyes were grounded on both of them. At this moment, Hiccup dammed the day he was named chief. At this moment, Astrid dammed the day she didn't get to snap Hiccup's arms out of his body when she first learned about Toothless.

When his fingers slid underneath the leather on her head, his face leaned to hers and kissed on the tip of her nose. His breathing was uneven. As if he had just been rescued from drowningâ€"or something.

She moved her face up and touched his lips with her own. Their lips reacted immediately to one another as they allowed themselves to get lost in one another. Grabbing and releasing one another until she felt the amulet release its hold from her head.

She pulled away from him. Enough to just catch the look on his faceâ€"which was as red as a rich apple. His eyes were still closed

for a few more seconds and when he brought himself to open them once again, he licked on his lips, and moved to plant a soft kiss on her forehead, where there lied the mark of her amulet on her skin. Then, he allowed the Kransen to slide down his wrist and down his forearm when he used that same hand to rest his palm on her cheek. Holding her face close to his own, tilting his head to the side, just enough for their lips to lock together once again.

Astrid pushed her lips gently against his own. Moving her hand up his arm and to meet with his hand up at her cheek. Gripping on it, as if asking him not to let go of her. As if pleading him to own her as much as they have desired to for just too many years.

His other hand slid down the small of her back, reaching for the back of her thigh and bringing her leg up to his hip. Astrid immediately moved her hand from his and found his face, sliding it to the back of his neck to get a tight hold onto him before he pushed her up to his arms, and allowing gravity force them both down to the bed. Having her back slam against the new bed and his chest land over hers. Taking away for just a second the small amount of oxygen they had in.

"Oookay, I've seen enough." Gobber said as he turned to walk out of the couple's bedroom. "Aye, kids these days...don't have any sense of patience."

"Gobber is right." Valka said while her face turned a stunning red. She moved to block all the other's sight and shoo them from the room. "They deserve the privacy. Off with all of you, now."

"I-I don't believe I should be convinced, Valka. Traditions state that witnesses shall see the couple's consummation in order to validate the contract." Spitelout pointed out.

"I believe the contract has already been validated without the need of an audience eyeing on how a maiden gives her virtue away to her husband." Valka affirmed, "Now off with you, I said."

Gothi, Plegma and Ingrid had made their way out of the room in silence. Spitelout hesitated for a few more seconds, glancing unconvinced at the couple that still carefully kissed on the bed, then huffed within and made his way out of the room.

"Aren't you coming?" He stopped his way right at the door, directing his question to Bertha, who leaned against the wall with both arms crossed against her chest and a strongâ€œunconvincedâ€ look on her face before unlocking her arms free and following Spitelout out of the room.

When Valka made sure everyone was out and gone from the bedroom, she glared back at the two newlyweds. "If you had taken my advice and be more like yourselves, you might be more convincing than that."

"Mom, they would still be here if we were ourselves." Hiccup mumbled against Astrid's lips, simply because he just had to keep himself from laughing out loud and ruin their plan. But, Astrid wasn't really that far from laughing as well. Her cheeks were already red enough to cause her to feel slightly dizzy.

Hiccup had a point. Both of them were shy enough to be on \_that\_ position in front of so many people. Especially, in front of their mothers. If they had acted like themselves, they would probably still be awkwardly kissing and no one would believe that they were capable of consummating their marriage on that very same evening.

"Still." Valka chuckled, rolled her eyes and walked out of the room, "Night..." closing the door behind her, she shook her head and muttered the last as she walked down the stairs, "...Kids..."

Back up, inside the bedroom, Hiccup and Astrid's lips finally unglued from one another. "Do you think they already left?" Astrid asked in soft whispers.

"My mom? Doubt it. The rest? Probably." Hiccup answered.

Astrid chuckled, then punched him off of her. Beginning to laugh a little more, though. "Where on Frigga's roads did you learn how to do \_that\_?"

"Do \_what\_?" Hiccup asked, laughing still as he stood from the bed and rubbed on his arm—where she had just punched him. His feet guided him to the window, and saw how Gobber, Plegma, Ingrid, Bertha, Spitelout, Gothi and Valka walked down the hill, back to town. "And to think so many people according to traditions had to witness our consummation." His body quickly shook in fright.

Astrid shrugged, "Well, good thing they just saw what we \_wanted\_ them to see." then she frowned back at him, "Hey, answer my question."

"What? Oh, well, during my bath today, Gobber mentioned on how men won women over in bed. So I just remembered some of his words." He explained. Still gazing out the window while taking his cloak off and hung it on the hanger before walking to place the Kransen on the dresser.

She kept her frown and climbed off the bed, "Well, allow me to inform you that it will certainly \_not\_ work on me."

"I never believed it would work on you." He honestly admitted. "I know you pretty well. I know what you like and what you don't like. Behaving like Snotlout isn't actually \_it\_."

Astrid rose a brow at him and then playfully smirked, "Oh, really?"

Hiccup just nodded several times.

Astrid then hummed and shrugged on her shoulder as she headed to the dresser and gazed on the silver shield that served as a mirror to them. She began taking the flowers off her curls. "We will see about that."

Hiccup chuckled, walking to her and standing right behind her. Resting both hands on her shoulders and leaning down to her ear, "Are you hungry?"

Her eyes widened. "We just ate."

"Then, thirsty?" He asked again, "A little ale, to celebrate?"

She smirked, tilted her head back to take a better look at him and then said "Alright then."

Hiccup then pulled back from her, took her hand in his and slowly guided her to the room door. She chuckled and pushed him out of the way so she could run off ahead.

"Hey! Why do you always have to play so dirty!?" He yelled while recovering his balance and ran after her. Laughing.

Astrid's feet took her to the center of their living room, where there was a blanket spread widely on the floor by the fireplace, four pillows and two more blankets well folded on the side. "I win!"

When Hiccup reached her, he shook his head and rolled his eyes, "Cheater." He mumbled before walking to the kitchen, opening the cabinets and grabbing a bottle of ale and two mugs.

"That's not cheating. It's called, \_Astrid's way.\_"

Hiccup snickered at that and served the drinks. As he did, he shifted his eyes from the mugs to her, from her to the mugs as he watched how she sat down on the blanket, lifted her dress just over her ankles and began rubbing on her bare feet that now looked quite swollen.

Even with her pained, silence expression, Hiccup just \_had\_ to get lost in the sight of a goddess sitting right in front of him, with her hair all loosened and brought over her shoulder as she leaned forward to rub on her feet. The fire light didn't help him reject the wonderful image, at all. His eyes were lost in her. Hardly understanding that this goddess that had taken the liberty of descending from the skies just to be here with him, was actually \_his wife\_.

The content spilled out from the mug as it wasn't until after the juices actually had contact with his hand that he snapped back to reality and removed the bottle from the way. Astrid heard the spill and snapped her head back up at him. "Need any help?"

"Ah, Uh, No! I'm fine. I just...spilled a little." He gagged while grabbing a cloth from the counter and cleaned the mess.

Astrid laughed, "No matter how old you get, you never seem to change, do you?"

Hiccup chuckled, bringing both mugs with him as he walked back to her. "I have no idea on what you are talking about." He looked down at how she rubbed on her feet once again. "Do they hurt?"

"Huh?!" She looked up again at him a little clueless for a second then smiled brightly and shook her head. Stretching her legs and hiding her feet under her dress. "No, it's just that I've been barefooted all night and the ground is getting violently cold."

"Why barefooted?" He asked, kneeling down and letting her take both cups from him as he got himself comfortable next to her.

"My mom made me go that way." She admitted. "She said it made the bride look more delicate."

"Yeah, but then your feet will pay the price. It's starting to get crazy-cold and winter is still a few months away."

Astrid just shrugged, offering him one of the mugs. He took it. "I've been through worse."

She was telling the truth, though. She had trained barefooted on solid ice when she was a girl of just eight years old. Walking on cold grounds was nothing compared to how extreme her training sessions have been.

Hiccup didn't say another word, so she just took a sip from her ale and set the cup aside. Glancing back at the fire.

Hiccup did the same. Though instead of staying seated, he set the mug aside and laid back down. Keeping his eyes into the fire. "We are married now, aren't we?" He asked.

She turned her head back at him, "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is, this isn't just another one of my dreams, right? I won't just see you now and then wake up all by myself, with Toothless licking me all over so I would fully wake up. Will I?"

Astrid chuckled at the sound of his soft whisper. She moved to crawl a little up closer to him. Leaning just over him. Draping an arm over his body and leaning her face closer to his, trying to find his eyes when they suddenly moved to look up at her. They were really big. Two bright emeralds that glistened with the light the fire emitted and was reflected on them. "We are." She whispered, leaning just a little closer, to kiss on his glabella. "Should I prove it's real?"

"Be my guest." He whispered back. Closing his eyes. Giving in as he usually does when with her.

"Good, because you will have to convince me, that I am not dreaming as well." She whispered before planting a soft kiss on his cheek, brushing her lips down his jawline. The sensation of his small, pointy-unshaven spaces surprising her lips. Actually enjoying it. Learning now, that she actually liked this new feature from him. Or was it just the heat of the moment?

She buried her lips in his neck, moving them back up his jawline. Allowing his rough facial skin scratch her soft one. Her hand slowly navigating up from his lower abs to his chest. Down again to his stomach and finally find its way underneath the hem of his tunic. Keeping her fingers still on his lower abs. Sending shivers all over his body.

No rush, no worries. Now, they could do all these things they've waited for so long. All the methods they've dreamt of, to please one another, now were okay to do. No guilt was allowed now.  
Why?

Simple...

"We are \_married\_." She mumbled the words against the bridge of his collarbone as she nibbled on it, over the layers of his tunic. Hearing how soft sighs escaped from his already parted lips.

Feeling his hand run up her back, to find the back of her neck, digging his fingers into her golden, wide curls. All the small flowers that remained in her hair began to slide down his carpal region and down his arm.

"\_Married\_..." He mumbled. As if he were dreaming. \_Again\_.

His body moved up, bringing her along with him into a sitting position as he pulled away from her. Just enough to open his eyes and watch her open hers.

She swallowed. Then licked on her lips.

Thicker and callused fingers trailed up her arm and choose her shoulder as its final destination. The hand he had on the back of her neck, lowered to her other shoulder and as their eyes pierced on one another. His hands slowly began pushing the sleeves down her arms. But halted their movement when he remembered his very own shyness.

Astrid took in a deep breath and biting down on her courage, her fingers found the hem of his shirt and allowing the sound of coal pop and heat in the fire by them be the music that distracts them from growing shy or nervous, she slowly brought his shirt up his stomach, to his chest, and waiting for him to raise his arms up over his head, she then removed his tunic and let it fall from her hand to the floor.

His hand again, found the back of her neck and ran simply two fingersâ€"index and middleâ€"across her jawline, over her chin, beneath the corner of her lower lip and across the line that divided one lip from the other.

Taking in the scent of the newly ale that had been accidentally dripped over his hand just a few minutes ago. Astrid's lips pushed against both of his fingers when soon, they were replaced by his very own lips.

With the way he was treating her, so gentle, so delicate, so \_Hiccup\_...He was repeating to her over and over how beautiful she looked that night. That he was bewitched by this unusual surprise. That he would give anything to never be released from said spell.

She just, let him. Simply because this time, no one was taking over no one. They were simply letting themselves be drowned into the seas of love and pleasure.

His hands returned to the bare shoulders, once again pushing her sleeves down her arms. The dress, sliding down her breast band, down her elbow. Hiccup's palms then went up her back, tracing the line of her spine with every finger in his hands until he rested a hand on the knot that kept that band well tight.

Astrid's right hand traveled up his sides and up to his hair. Gripping gently on it, hearing his nostrils release a strong exhale



and his vocal cords try to hold back a growl. These sounds, were all so new to her. She had teased him before, heard him moan before. But these sounds, were especially new to her ears. He was letting out sounds of freedom to do what he pleased now that they didn't have anyone prohibiting their recklessness.

Soon, she felt her bands begin to loosen. How his fingers worked patiently to undo her knot as for when they finally succeeded, she had pulled back from their delicate kissing and looked up at him.

Her hand dropped from his hair and landed on his bare chest. Over his heart. Eyes still in his, her hand moving along with his chest as he breathed in and out. Feeling his heart pounding uncontrollably within.

Hiccup began unwrapping her chest as if he were a child discovering a new present. Until the sight of her bare chest left him completely astounded. His hands found their immediate way up her forbidden fruits and circled them. Tracing small figures with his fingertips on them before cupping them in.

Cheeks went red once again. Not a wild one, but red. Astrid began thinking he might not even be happy with the fact she had a small chest.

It later then caught her off guard when she felt two warm lips trembling against the skin of her chest. Right between both fruits. Brushing his lips up to her right breast, planting small kisses over the tender flesh he had now claimed as his to keep. Not really helping the slight smile when he heard his wife trying to hold her own sighs back.

Astrid's hand moved down his sides, over his hip, above his thigh and up to find herself a throbbing tightness between his legs. She didn't touch him. But she moved both hands to work on the ties of his trousers. When they were already loose, Hiccup pulled back from her chest and leaned in again to kiss her lips. This time, their lips made ways for their tongues to take part on their love making.

His arm snaked around her waist and moved to lay her back down, and beneath him. She took advantage of the moment to travel both hands down his shoulders, his arms, up to adventure on his back and to his buttocks. Finding the hem of his trousers, pushing them down his thighs and letting them slide down his legs.

The hand he used to protect the back of her head when Hiccup moved them to lay down, he moved it down her sides and met with his other hand, over her abdomen. Pushing down what was left of her dress and waiting for her to kick it off of her feet.

Hiccup then began kissing down her neck when she suddenly rolled them over. Being now the one on top of him.

Laughing while it, Astrid straddled on his lap, still letting him bury his face in her neck. Her right hand supported her still as the other rested on his shoulder. Releasing soft sighs as she felt his tongue take over her jugular zone and his hand travel down her sides and over her buttocks.

The twitching point between his legs soon found its way to poke on a newly dripping spot between her own legs. Moaning, Astrid blinked twice, trying to keep herself from backing away because of the sudden fright that had flooded over her. Though, it never really stopped her from releasing a silent moan. Not even daring to give in to the fright. Astrid immediately searched for his hand and when she found itâ€”holding her hipâ€”she guided it to her pleading point and opened her mouth, releasing a stronger sigh at the feeling of his calloused fingers touching her.

Pulling back from their passionate kissing, Hiccup blinked back up at her. Surprised on how much they both seemed to yearn to become one.

The boy pulled his hand back. She frowned at him as a response.

He laughed at her reaction and moved to sit right beneath her. Groaning within once their weaknesses contacted. Guessing she wanted to be one with him as much as he did, Hiccup wrapped both arms around her and embracing her as tight as he could, he laid them back down and rolled them over. Moving to be on top of her.

Astridâ€”to his surpriseâ€”helped him accommodate himself over her and moved his hips between her legs. Rising her knees up to his sides, stretching her back and using one hand to move his face up to hers.

She wanted to look into his eyes. To enjoy how they switched so incredibly fast from an innocent bright green to a lustful black. How his lips parted just enough to let beautiful and loud sighs that assured her he actually liked her body as much as she had countless times dreamt of.

So did Hiccup. All of these soft, innocent moans emerging from her vocal chords were like a new toy to him. New and curious. He wanted to hear more. It overjoyed him to know he was pleasing the body and soul of the woman of his dreams...of his wife.

It seemed to have bothered her when he blindly moved his hips to hers. Since her eyes suddenly shut tight and her nails dug into the skin of his arms.

Of course, she wouldn't let me see where I'm going. How am I supposed to know if I am hurting her or not?â€”he thoughtâ€”Well, I guess I will know if it hurts her, right? I mean, Astrid never hesitates to physically hurt me. I doubt she would hide it if I hurt her...yeah. Let's think like that. Okay, Hiccup, you can do it. But don't hurt her, or you'll be dead before you know it. I can do this...I can do this I-I-Iâ€”He froze his intents when the head of his member was pretty much trespassing her inner lips and he watched how her teeth bit even harder on her lips\_.â€”I can't do this.

His body collapsed over hers. Sighing in frustration as he hid his face in her neck and whispered the words against her skin, "I can't do this."

"What?" She blinked. Her voice as low as his was. Eyes trying to blink away all the stinging this rupture was actually causing her. Not pain.

"What if I hurt you?"

"Hiccup, it doesn't hurt." She confessed.

Hiccup pulled back just enough to meet her face, "It doesn't?"

Not really helping to laugh at his confounded expression combined with unbelievable fright, Astrid shook her head and brought her hand up to his sweaty face. Caressing him until calm. "It \_stings\_. But it's not like I will die."

"Does, it sting now?" As he asked, his hips moved a little forward.

She nodded in response. Gripping on his arm a little harder.

"Liar!" He blurted. "I \_am\_ hurting you."

"Hiccup, don't be such a baby!" She frowned, "If you were hurting me, don't you think I would have already beaten the apologies out of you?"

Hiccup's eyes blinked twice in realization before lowering his head back down to hide his face into her neck. Once again. Filling his lungs with her scent, studying every inch of her body as his hand traveled up and down her sides and his chest rose and fell uneven with hers. "I'm just, scared Astrid. What if you turn out to be as fragile as a vase?"

She laughed, burying her hand in his hair. "I'm not. Hiccup. You know that better than anyone."

He didn't respond. Not this time. What he did, was simply keep his face in her neck and try to remember that it was okay to make that one single move forward. That it won't endanger anyone at all. That she won't break in his arms because she was in fact, very much stronger than he was.

Understanding more than just well his sudden reaction, Astrid stroked his hair and kissed on his temple. Wrapping her other arm around him, embracing him in as much as she could, whispering soothing words to at least try and ease his worries. Astrid thought that their very first time wasn't at all bad. They \_connected\_. Not fully, but they \_did\_ connect. She knew now may be just the best moment to encourage him into getting rid of a senseless fear of breaking her into pieces.

\_Wait, did the guys brainwash him and tell him men were to literally break women\_?!â€"she thought. Rolling her eyes and sighing in silence, knowing Snotlout and Tuffnut were perfect to take advantage of an inexperienced boy and scare him to death.

Rocking him once more in her arms, Astrid kissed on his temple one more time before whispering in his ear, "You know, Hiccup, it's okay if you don't feel ready. We can always waiâ€"Aah-hah!"

The member that was suddenly pushed completely inside her cut her words off short and tore what was left of her sealed insides wide open. She bit on her lower lip, dug her nails on his back and shut her eyes tight. Feeling as if all the blood in her body had flowed up

to her brain, that her legs had suddenly gotten numb and her stomach contracted. All of her oxygen was taken away for a quick second and as she tried to gasp for some, instead of receiving air, all she could do was release loud moans as a tight and strong muscle discovered her insides and pushed tightly against her cervix.

"You said, it wouldn't hurt you." He panted.

Faintly smiling, Astrid kissed on his sweaty forehead and shook her head, "You caught me off guard. But it doesn't hurt. Like I said, it stings a lot. Not hurt."

"You know, there is a very thin line between the words \_stinging\_ and \_hurting\_." He said.

She chuckled and tapped playfully on his back, "Shut up."

Hiccup laughed. Not really helping it as he moved his face to catch a glimpse of hers. Then, curious to see how she would react if he dares to move inside her, Hiccup began to slowly rock his hips back and forth.

"Hiccup?"

"Uh, yes, Astrid?"

Her lips moved to his earlobe, spreading paused whispers, trying as much as she could to complete her sentence without allowing uncontrolled moans and pants disturb the message she wanted to send. "I-I-It-feelsâ€" But she couldn't. Not as simple as she would want it to be. Telling him how strange but great it felt to have him inside her, was a lot harder than how she would ever picture it. She wanted him to stay inside for a lot longer. This new muscle becoming part of her body as well was something she wanted to last. But, as the pants disrupted her words, she ended up by whispering between sharp breaths "...I-love you."

His lips widened. Cheeks flushing and arms trembling with the urges to grip on her sides and thrust his hips a lot harder in her. The number of times Astrid had spilled the words \_I love you\_, to him, were really low. She usually showed him better than what she could tell him. So did he. But this time, those words sounded much more special than any other day. Simply because now, he was hearing those words from the lips of his new wife, while officially becoming one with her. Which, within his innermost secrets, was all he had been yearning for ever since he discovered that her being his, was all he ever wanted.

Soon, her hips began to respond and they were then moving together. He brought himself up, just enough to catch her lips and even with the kind of indescribable pleasure they both felt, their lips crashed one over the other. Mixing their pants together, emitting unique melody from their lips, letting the heat of the room grow with every thrust, every kiss...every embrace.

It came the moment, when all that truly mattered to them, was how both of their lives were combined that night and turned into one. The world could have collapsed around them, and neither of them would notice nor care. There was only time and space for just the two of them. Even after his seed was well planted deeply within her, it was

still a little troublesome for them to believe they were actually one. Even with the gentleness of each and every flower that fell from her hair and landed around them; on his sweating broad back, on her sticky arms...near the fire-The feeling and thought of it being just a dream, remained vivid in their heads, until even after their eyes closed and the fire faded out into the darkness.

#### 14. Strange Wish

Those golden locks still hid great part of her face as he laid by her side, admiring her sleeping and peaceful figure. How impossible it seemed to believe she was such a terrifying creature whenever she wanted to be one. Thinking on how many times they had exchanged desperate kisses, how many times they allowed their souls get lost within the mysterious labyrinth those forsaken hormones had been sending them throughâ€"all in just one night. Recalling how her body melted in his mouth, in his hands and beneath his hips. Experiencing how foreign it felt, to have their skins trapped in one another, yet how wonderful it all was.

Indeed, Astrid was telling the truth. This time, he didn't open his eyes to an overly excited reptile. No. this time, his eyes found a Valkyrie laying by his side. With her knees up to her chest. Seeming like she was intending to hold onto something really special to her.

To think, this was just to be the first sweet morning of many, only made Hiccup's head feel incredibly light. The curtains that stopped the sunlight from intruding through the windows, letting darkness stay for a while longer in the room, reminded him over and over how much he ardently loved this incredible woman near his bare arms while his fingers absently moved from the lowest of his stomach to the center of his chest. Gently touching over the small-red mark her lips had created just a few hours ago. Then, they moved down again, brushing over to his left mammary gland, where he found another red mark.

Seems like I wasn't the only one wanting to eat her alive...â€"He thought. Reviving the moments in his head when she moved to lay over him, exploring his entire body with just her lips and teeth. Leaving her mark on him without forgetting a single region. Having him tremble under her touch as he mumbled small bits of her name and tried not to make any move that would impede her from continuing.

Now, he felt drained. Every part of his body felt unbelievably heavy to him. His fingers trembled without any reason at all and his knees ached. Perhaps, there was a reason to it after all. Yes, there was one. It became quite difficult for him to believe that an entire night of pure passion would leave him feeling this weak. Even his mouth felt dry at the moment.

Nevertheless, to him, Astrid looked beautiful while doing it. She seemed to care less of whatever the consequences of allowing their bodies give into such lustful sin were. She was hungry. No, they were both equally hungry. It all felt wrong; too sinful but all too good.

"Quit staring at me." Still hiding her face under that hair of hers,

her mumbles drew his attention from the memories replaying in his head, to the unforgiving present era they found themselves in.

Hiccup couldn't help the slight laughter that escaped from his lungs as he shook his head and leaned closer. Brushing a hand on her face, removing all the hair obstructing his view. "Morning, milady."

Her eyes were still closed. Brows slightly frowning and relaxing, "You are starting to act like a true chief. \_Finally\_."

"What makes you say that?" He asked.

"You've been waking up a lot earlier than usual."

Hiccup chuckled, rolled his eyes and then laid on his back. Staring up at the ceiling. Though, she \_was\_ right. Usually, everyone wakes up a lot earlier than he does. Even Toothless. Well, \_especially\_ Toothless. The thought of it only made him sigh the following words to his wife, "There are many things that keep me from oversleeping, nowadays." pauses, "Like, what is to do next in the village, how I should do things...so and so."

At last, her eyes opened. Staring up at him with a serene gaze. "You are doing perfectly well, so far."

His lips formed a thin, lifted line to the right once he heard her. Knowing that no matter the situation they were in, Astrid always finds a way to spray out the positive side of things. He had forgotten all that. During the past few days where they only experienced bad times and could find themselves at the verge of losing one another, Hiccup forgot how she too, knew how to create a wave of calm and peace in him.

As Hiccup moved to lay on his side, he leaned to kiss on her forehead. Her eyes closed once again. "How are you, this morning?" Sliding his arm around her and scooting closer to her. Digging his fingers into the sheets that covered the exposed skin of the lowest of her backside.

"Good." She breathed, "\_Happy\_."

While his lips traced down to her glabella and then parted to ask her if she felt hungry or in need for somethingâ€”the door was being loudly knocked on six times.

Without any premeditation, both of their bodies moved to sit up straight and their heads turned at the still closed door before Astrid opened her mouth to say, "Who on Loki's miseryâ€”"

"Astrid! Open tha door."

When Hiccup recognized the voice coming from the other side of their door, he looked down at her, crawled behind her and hid his head in her messy hair. Making it quite clear that he wasn't exactly in the right mood to face \_that\_ specific Viking. "Sounds like your mom..." He said.

Her hands quickly bringing the covers over her chest as she felt how Hiccup's arm moved protectively around her and gripped on the blanket

as well. Trying to hide what was already well hidden from her bareness and hugging her close from behind. "I'm still sleeping." She whispered, gently pushed her elbow against his sides so he'd let go of her, and then laid back down. Pulling the sheets over her head.

He glared down at her, "Yeah, right. And I suppose you are talking while still sleeping."

"Shut up, she can hear us."

"I certainly can." Bertha yelled back. Making both young lovers guiltily shrink their heads in their shoulders, then glanced back at each other.

"Told you..." She whispered. Pressing her index finger tight against her lips and narrowing her eyesâ€"for him not to say another wordâ€"while it before standing up and wrapping the sheets around her nakedness. Astrid then pointed that same index finger at Hiccup and then at the door. After such, she pointed her thumb at herself and then pointed her index finger back at the stairs.

Understanding the messageâ€"and not agreeing with itâ€"Hiccup frowned once again at her and shook his head side to side several times in denial. Moving his lips as if to say the word no in mute. Astrid might be silently asking him to open the door while she gets dressed, but that didn't mean Hiccup agreed with the plan.

"She's your mom. You receive her." He mouthed.

"Hiccup, look at me. I'm naked. I can't see my mom while looking like this." She forced the whispers down at him. Then, before Hiccup would even think of protesting once more, she balled her hand into a tight fist, her knuckles cracking aloud.

He squeezed his eyes shut and held up the needs to release an awfully loud exhale that would reveal how frustrated he was starting to feel. Out of all the time in the worldâ€"he thoughtâ€"why does she have to pick this one?!

The door was knocked again, this time, a lot harder. Twice. "I will grow old and frozen out here."

"Fine by me." Hiccup muttered to himself as for when his eyes moved to see Astrid once again, she was already running halfway up the stairs and disappeared into the hall that led to the other three empty rooms of the cabin. Moving his legs to stand up from the floor, scratching on his scalp as he located his trousers somewhere by the fireplace and slid them on. "Coming Bertha. I mean, Mrs. Hofferson..." He called back while dusting his tunic and putting it on as he walked to the door.

In all honesty, Hiccup wasn't at all happy to receive an unexpected visit from his now new mother-in-lawâ€"or from anyone by chance. His original plans, were to wake up as early as possible and sneak away with Astrid for at least a few hours. Riding on Toothless' back with her, to live once again the wonderful experience they did back when they were fifteen years old and he had taken her on their first flight. This time, he wanted to revive that moment, with the only difference that they were now just married. He also wanted to race

her and Stormfly across the ocean and disappear into the horizon for a fewâ€”longâ€”hours. To forget everything that surrounded them, to pretend that they didn't have responsibilities...to feel like there was nothing in the world that could get between them.

But, apparently, they slept far more than what they were both used to and all of the things he wanted to accomplish on his first day as a husband, were to remain as part of his very own fantasy.

His eyes fell to the door handle. On the bronze key already inserted in the lock set. Waiting to be turned straight so the deadbolt would move back and then the door would open. Did he have to think so much on how to remove a lock from a door? Or, was it that he really didn't want to unlock the truth about how he had to face reality once that door opens?

Eyelids began feeling heavy all of the sudden. Taking in a deep breath, Hiccup stretched his hand out to reach the key and turned it to the left. Sighing aloud once he heard the clicking sound it made. As his hand fell from the key, leaving it still inside the lock-set and holding onto the handle, finally pulling the door back open. Moving out of the way to let his visitor in.

Bertha, had a sharp look in her eyes as she made herself in and eyed the insides of the living room. She was holding a basket in her right hand. "What took yeh so long?" She asked. Going straight to the kitchen and placing the basket on the kitchen island. Then scurrying to slide open the curtains from the window, making Hiccup's forearm move to protect his eyes from the stinging sunlight that suddenly felt like needles to his skin.

After his body got used to the light, Hiccup shrugged, not even aware of how careless his voice might have sounded. "Well, forgive me, Bertha. I just...had to wake up first." He lied.

Bertha snorted. Then looked down at the mess of sheets and pillows by the fireplace. "I see yer mother hasn't taught you anything about keeping a house clean. Then again, who could blame a child raised by a man whom he barely saw?"

By the time Hiccup narrowed his eyebrows at the woman and opened his mouth to spread out the kind of words he might regret later on, a door from the upper level of the house was banged closed and soon, Astrid was walking down the stairs, fixing on her forearm-bands.

The look on Astrid's eyes could have made him guess that she had heard her mother's littleâ€”and unnecessaryâ€”comment. She just walked in silence while keeping her eyes straight at her mother. Hiccup could swear; that if it was ever possible to murder someone by just looking into their eyes, then Astrid would have already burned the woman down into ashes.

Both, Hiccup and Bertha were caught off guard as soon as they both eyed the girl from head to toe. She was wearing her usual dark blue leggings, furry boots, spiked-leather skirt, scarlet tunic and that beige colored furry hood that hung from the back of her shoulders. Her hair was neatly brushed into a perfect braid that rested over her left shoulder, and across her pale forehead, lied a leather band.

It was like, nothing had changed in her. Nothing at all.



Hiccup's stare only made her relax the scary glare she was sending her own mother for being rude to him and then quickly change it into a devious smirk back at him. As for when she reached him, she placed a hand on his arm and moved it up to his shoulder, then down to his chest. Trying to fix the messy image of his shirt. "You look as if you just saw a stranger." She teased.

"Well, sort of." He tried. But then gagged more than what he could clearly speak, "I um...uh...I expected something more like a dress, or a helmet."

"Don't be silly." Was all she said before moving away from him and making her way towards her mother, who had been removing the white cloth that covered the basket's contents. Inside, there was a small cup of some still-hot-tea, surrounded by a large amount of herbs.

"I believe you must have this right away." Bertha whispered to her daughter.

Astrid just nodded and took the cup from the basket. Being slightly startled when she felt Hiccup's breath warming down at her ear. "What is that?" He asked from above her shoulder as his eyes landed on the cup's content. Both of his hands held behind his back.

"Tea." Astrid said.

"Tea of \_what\_?" He asked.

"Well, aren't you a very inquisitive chief?!" Her sarcastic reaction made him pout at her as she moved away from him. Keeping the cup close to her chest. Narrowing her eyes at him and pushing her lips up. Thinking that his rates of curiosity might make him look like a curious little child trying to know everything that happened around him.

Hiccup whimpered in discontent and then relaxed his shoulders. Still gazing down at the cup. Thinking that no matter what, he \_will\_ find out what kind of tea that was that made it special enough for him not to be filled in.

"I will leave you two alone now. I have things to take care of." Bertha muttered, then rolled her eyes and made her way to the door.

When the woman was gone, and their front door was well closed, Hiccup sighed in relief and once again walked around Astrid as he brushed away those loose bangs that tickled on his forehead before mumbling the words, "Thank Odin..."

"I heard that." Astrid growled.

Hiccup's eyes widened back at her, then his head shrunk into his shoulders. Trying to seem at least somewhat innocent. "\_What\_? She gives me the chills. Sometimes she seems like she wants to protect you and other times, she looks at you as if she wants to sellâ€". As soon as he realized what he was actually saying and to \_who\_ he was saying it to, Hiccup's tongue twisted and then brought a hand up to his mouth, brushing it down his chin and looking away as he tried to think of something to cover up what he just said. "â€"um...as if

she...no...li-li-like she wants to...uh \_celebrate\_ your every triumph! Yeah! That's what I meant..." He lied.

She didn't seem to buy it. Shit, he \_knew\_ she wouldn't fall for it. He expected her to throw the damn basket at him for talking like that about her own mother. But...Astrid just stayed still. Simply staring at him with emotionless ocean blue eyes. Her lips seemed to struggle to move.

It wasn't his intention to speak out his mind like that, it only bothered him how Bertha had behaved on the past few days. All careless and disrespectful and then apparently blessing their marriage all of the sudden. It sickened him to just think of how her mood mysteriously switched from one to another and the knowledge of her being the kind of woman that would do \_anything\_ in her power to have a high status, only made him feel worse.

Astrid's silence made him glance back at her. She looked like she had just frozen in time. Her eyes didn't emit any emotion and her hands still hid the cup close to her chest. Why wasn't she reacting all violently at him?

Thinking that it better be nowâ€"or neverâ€"to try and apologize to her, Hiccup's hand slowly moved forward to touch hers when she pulled further away from him and rejected his apologies with her slight frown.

"I know she might be a pain in the ass at times, Hiccup. But you'll have to get used to her. Just like how I did."

Hiccup scoffed at her and then tilted his head to the side, "Astrid, if for twenty years, I haven't gotten used to her, I certainly won't think any differently for the next fifty years. Even if I wanted to."

"Even so." Astrid's lips were already brushing against the mug in her hands as she took one sip in. Her eyes squeezed shut and her shoulders shrug in disgust for a quick momentâ€"fast enough for Hiccup to notice.

"What do you have there?" He asked, again. Slowly approaching her and focusing his gaze down at her mugâ€"again.

"None of your business, Hiccup."

His eyes narrowed, backing a few steps away. Trying to make his expression look as hurt as he could so she would at least feel a little of compassion for his usual sense of curiosity.â€"Even if he knew she wouldn't exactly fall for it \_that\_ easily. "Is that any way to speak to your husband? Now, where is the love and care for him?"

Astrid rolled her eyes at him as for when she turned to face him, he was already standing right by her. "Are you hungry? I'll serve you some breakfast if you like. Gobber left us some fish and yak milk." Her hands moved the mug down and hid it behind her hip. Trying to get him to look elsewhereâ€"and to move away from her and simply \_stay\_ away.

He did stay away this time. Thinking that it might not be the best

idea to just sway back and forth if he truly wanted to figure out what was in that tea that made it so mysterious. "If it comes from Gobber, fine by me." He teased. Though she didn't really react to his mocking, which only made him feel even more curious about that tea of hers.

Astrid placed the mug on the countertop and moved to open one of the cabinets. Grabbing a bottle full of yak milk and an empty mug. She then walked to place them on the dining table while Hiccup walked around the kitchen island and eyed the cup of tea on the countertop as if it was some kind of strange new object he had never seen before. He glanced back at Astrid and as she kept herself busy with whatever she was doing with the bottle of yak milk, Hiccup took the mug in his hand and brought it up to his nose. Sniffing on it and then moving his nose in quick-small-circles before he gave his wife another quick glance and while thinking he should take the chance as soon as he could, he brought the cup up to his lips and took a bigâ€”and regretfulâ€”amount of tea down his throat in just one gulp. Choking on its fishy taste, his arm forced his hand to place the cup back on the countertop as he banged his fist against his chest and coughed aloud. His eyes reddened. Trying to spit back out everything he might still have stored in his stomach.

Astrid chuckled, as she turned to watch him. Making no effort in feeling concerned. It was as if she had already expected him to drink from the cup anyway. Walking back to him, she took his hand from his chest and held it in hers while resting her other hand on the upper side of his back. Carefully tapping on it. "That, usually happens to nosy kids." Hiccup just continued coughing his lungs out. Almost kneeling down to the floor. But she held him strong enough to keep him on his feet. "Hiccup, you are overreacting. It's not that bad."

While trying to gain back at least a decent amount of breath, the boy looked up at her in disbelief. "Not that bad?!" He breathed, "That thing tastes as if a dragon had just ate a load of fish and then regurgitated it more than eight times! What is that dreadful drink?"

"SnowBell tea." She responded. Still remaining as calm as ever. Truth was, Astrid thought of it that way simply because she was well used to the taste. Her mother had been making her drink SnowBell tea ever since she turned eighteen years old and grew a good pair of breasts that not even her bands could keep flat for much longer.

"What is that?" Hiccup asked. Shaking his shoulders in horror and disgust as he walked over to the table, serving himself some milk and taking in large amounts of it. Hoping the milk would send away the awful taste the tea had left in his palate.

"Tea." Astrid answered. Clearly not desiring to give out some more explanations about it. "You know, hot water with herb extract?"

Hiccup glanced over his shoulder, pouting back at her. "I know what a tea is, Astrid. What I want to know, is what this SnowBell tea is for?"

"Just...tea." She turned her back to him. Taking the now famous cup in her hands and observing the small amount of tea that was left in

it and then taking it in on just one gulp. Slightly frowning at the taste but then shaking it off before placing the cup in the sink.

"Astrid..." Hiccup called. Leaving the mug of milk on the table and slowly starting to walk back to her. When he found himself standing right behind her, his hands moved to hold her waist and gently turned her to face him. As if he was treating a gentle ballerina. Her eyes didn't meet his. Her cheeks revealed a pale pink shade, and her lower lip was being violently beaten up by her teeth. Hiccup then took in a deep breath and as soft and sweet as he could manage his voice to come out as, he said, "...The truth, \_please\_?"

Astrid sighed, exasperated. Then took one of his hands and slid it from her waist to the lowest of her stomach. Hoping he would use his brilliant brain and guess what was so hard for her to allow her lips to release. As his hand rested over the lowest of her abdomen, Hiccup delayed just a few seconds while his eyes left hers and focused down to where she wanted him to touch. Slightly perplexed, trying to figure out what she truly wanted from him at the moment. Until his eyes moved from his hand on her stomach, to the pair of sapphire gems that adorned her face. His lips fell open as he tilted his head to the right and remained silent. Trying as much as he could to make a good guess. Then, a soft grumble of hunger emerging from her insides had smacked him back into the obvious and made his eyes blink twice in recognition. His throat made way for an incredibly large amount of saliva down his esophagus before beginning to gag his words out.

"Um...Is it..." he began, "...To...keep us from um..."

"Yes." She finished for him. "It is supposed to temporarily make me \_infertile\_."

Hiccup's cheeks suddenly revealed an ardent red as his hand on her stomach began to tremble. Making Astrid whimper and pull away from him when he impulsively took a strong grip on her arm, pulled her closer to him and wrapped his other arm around her waist. To Hiccup, their conversation wasn't over just yet.

"Since when?" He asked. His tone now a little shallow.

"Since I was eighteen." She honestly whispered. Letting his warm and heavy breath send shivers down her spine as he leaned closer and closer and&€"very much \_dangerously\_ closer.

His eyes searched for unknown things on her face as he studied every spontaneous lick her tongue did to her lips, every blink on her eyes, every time her teeth came out to trap her lower lip&€"everything\_. Soon, his heart began to yell loudly at his head. Suddenly feeling unbelievably disenchanted with her confession. Then, as his breathings became a little harsh by the second, he said, "Why?"

Though he \_knew\_ very well the answer to his own question, Hiccup wanted to hear her voice deny the desire of a child of his. He wanted her to lie to him if she felt like it. To tell him she wanted the results to be very much accurate and not risk any chances in getting knocked up on the least expected moment of their lives. His brain...wanted to hear \_lies\_. But his heart, his quick-desperate

heart, wanted to hear her tell him otherwise.

Then, her lips broke the seal they had and as she leaned to brush her lips against the harsh skin of his chin, she responded on the very same low tone as he did, "I won't serve as a good warrior, by your side, if I am with child."

The answer shocked him. However, it was true. Realizing how she couldn't just allow herself be fertile when they had so many things going on around them, Hiccup just released a harsh sigh and decided not to respond this time. Astrid took that chance to brush her lips up to meet his parted ones and push her tongue into them. He caught her in and gave into her. Drowning himself in that new and dangerous sensation that grew within his chest ever since his hands touched her bare skin for the very first time just a few hours ago. Welcoming the cravings to have her once again. To claim her.

This time, she was the one claiming him. By the slow movements of her mouth as she moved her tongue up and down against his own. Hasty grips on her waist made her realize he might be wanting to tell her something. But Astrid only continued kissing him as fervently as her heart would demand her to. Sliding both hands up his chest and around his neck. Keeping him from pulling away from her—"so soon.

The movement of one of his hands, from her waist to the lowest of her back and then pull her hips against his own, made Astrid release a soft-surprising sigh as she felt how within his trousers, something had begun tightening. Instinctively, her right thigh rose and fell against his own thigh. Tempting him to have her.

Understanding the meaning of her rubbing against his thigh, Hiccup slid his other hand under her skirt and found the hem of her leggings. Pulling them down until they fell to her mid-thighs. Then, he slid that same hand to her inner thighs and met with the aching flesh well hidden under her skirt. Dipping his middle finger inside her while his palm pressed against the rest of her forbidden region. Enjoying every soft moan his wife released against his mouth. Having her fingers grasp on his hair and her hips slowly move back and forth. "Asâ€|we...have...to go." He muttered against her lips. Reminding her that they had duties that couldn't possibly wait a few more hours.

"Shh...Five minutes." Her response only made him deviously smile. What was he thinking?! After driving her into a point where she wouldn't be able to push him away, he dared encourage her to make him stop?

When his fingers were pulled from her, the short whines she emitted were silenced when in such a quick move, the bulge needing to break through his already tight trousers had pressed against her.

Growling, displeased, Astrid moved her hips away from his. Her legs shifted quickly enough for her leggings to fall to her ankles and as she kicked her boots off, her hands worked their best to free him from the agony his pants kept him in. Then, her arms were thrown over his shoulders and as he lifted her just enough to enter her, she hid her face in his jugular and squeezed her eyes tight. Trying to take in the facts that her muscles were still trying to get used to this new intruder that claimed and devoured the insides of her

body.

Letting their bodies move by themselves, with the rhythm of desire and lust itself, Hiccup's hands stayed steady on her buttocks as soon as he felt her legs wrapped around his waist. He then carefully moved to sit her on the isle. Loudly breaking their ardent kissing, feeling how her right hand took large amounts of his hair in and tugged from it with every thrust as her other hand dug her nails into his shoulder.

Sticking his cheek against hers, panting into her ear and trying not to let his lips dry fast enough to break in just a few minutes. Hearing her low sighs and pleads for more as he felt her hand fall from his shoulder, to grope on his buttocks and push him even faster and deeper into her. Feeling all of his blood suddenly flush to specifically one part of his body and soon, release his entire strengths into her.

Their foreheads touched. Breathings harsh and nearly impossible to tame. Hands loosening their grips. Hers went to the sides of his shoulders while his hands wrapped around her waist and kept her still and as close to him as it was ever possible. His thumbs gently rubbing against her skin. His eyelids moved upward at the same time as hers did, making emerald and sapphire finally meet.

Astrid's lips stretched into a playful smile as she pushed them against his own. "What's with the long face?" She teased. Her voice sounding a little shaky.

It was then when Hiccup realized his expressions to her might not be the most loving for the moment. No, he was actually feeling quite concerned of what the future might hold for them. No matter how many times she'd drink that nasty tea, he perfectly knew that the percentage of accuracy was below thirty-five. But, as soon as she made him realize his expression might have gotten a little off, he slowly shook his head in denial. Then, after a few more seconds of utter silence between them, he released the kind of words he would have never imagined to come out of his own lips, "One day...grow us a child." Realizing he actually wanted something that symbolized the product of their love and loyalty.

Her eyes snapped back up at his. Blinking three times in shock. "W-what?"

"I said," He began, but his harsh breathings wouldn't let him repeat himself. So he just closed his eyes, and went on, "a healthy child, that resembles you in countless ways."

As he talked, his lips soon brushed against the skin of her forehead, down her glabella, to the tip of her nose, and then stayed on her right cheek. "But Hiccup, Iâ€"

"One day...I said..." He cut her off. "...One\_ \_day..." He knew now wasn't exactly the best time to have a child. The entire village was about to sink itself into a battle that would probably mean Berk's absolute destructionâ€considering their position of recuperation from Drago's attack. He understood the facts that kept Astrid from even thinking about the possibilities of bearing a child. But none of those things made him think otherwise. One day, he would love to wake up to the desperate calls of an excited little one

trying to wake him up.â€"Even if on the back of his imagination, the simple thought of being a father started to feel completely odd.

In the end, Astrid just gave in. Nodding her head once, smiling as warmly as her lips ever allowed her to and sliding a hand up to his face, caressing him dearly. Who was she to object to a desire spoken from his heart itself? Yes, it caught her off guard. She never imagined him speak like this to her, pouring his heart's desires down at her hands. But, what rights did she have to burn down his illusions for a future family with her? As much as it made her feel uncomfortable, she just...agreed. "One day." She whispered. Simply hoping \_that\_ one day he desired for, wasn't anywhere near them.

Soon, Hiccup pulled away from her and helped her stand on her feet without stumbling. He fixed his pants and then ran a hand backwards through his hair as he walked back to the dining table.

In silence, Astrid crouched down to get her leggings and slid them back up. Then, as her feet found their way inside her boots, her eyes searched for him once again. "Let me serve you some breakfast."

Without even waiting for an answer, Astrid moved back to the countertop and while searching for a clean bowl, Hiccup cleared on his throat, "I think I'm good with just the milk. I'm not that hungry anyway."

Her arm halted halfway to grab the bowl she had spotted. "Are you sure?" She asked.

Hiccup nodded and drank up the last drop of milk in the mug. "Trust me, after tasting that diabolical tea of yours, I think I'll stick to yak milk until the memory and horrid taste wears off."

Though he was actually talking quite seriously, his tone had a little of amusement left in it. Astrid just rolled her eyes and shrugged. Showing that she actually cared less than what he would want her to. "You very well deserve it for being nosy." Not letting him say another word, the young lady walked to the door, grabbed her axe, opened the door and started walking out. "See you later."

"Wait!" Hiccup called back, running after her and closing the door behind him.

Astrid turned on her heel and swung the axe over her shoulder. Tilting her head to the side. "What?"

"Where are you going?" He asked.

She rose a brow. "As if you \_don't\_ know." Muttered, "To the Dragon Training Academy, of course."

Hiccup quickly shook his head. "No. You can't."

"Because...?"

"Because I will need you to fly off with me and measure the island. That way we may know how much further we need to expand the forts."

He explained.

Astrid held her answer for a moment, while she thought deeply on all the things they had to do, especially now that they were finally married. Now, what truly mattered was to fortify the island in order to stop chances of being balled into a very bad shapeâ€”once again.

When her eyes met his again, Toothless was already walking to stand by Hiccup's side. "I still have to tell the gang." She pointed out.

Hiccup nodded. "Fine, then go. But come to me as soon as you can."

Astrid nodded in agreement and winked at Toothless before turning to find Stormfly standing right behind her. Gasping in excitement, she attached her axe on her back and then moved to rub on her dragon's scales. "Why, good morning to \_you\_ beautiful! Did you sleep well in your new hut?"

Stormfly purred aloud and moved closer to her rider, wanting for more of those magic fingers of hers. Few seconds later, Astrid pulled away from her dragon just enough to climb on her back and glance back down at Hiccup, who was now mounting on Toothless. "Give me an hour." Those, were her last words before Stormfly took off to the skies.

\* \* \*

><p>"May I ask what on Thor's name are you guys doing?" Astrid asked as Stormfly landed on the arena's center and Astrid jumped from her back. Frowning at the teenagers that remained on different spots of the academy doing nothing usefulâ€”at all.<p>

Fishlegs, was sitting on the ground, watching Meatlug lick on his bare feet and encouraging her not to stop. Simply enjoying every moment of it. Snotlout, was also sitting on the floor, leaning back against Hookfang and picking on the farther lands hidden in his nose. And the twins, well, they were standing down between Barf and Belch, playing what seemed like a staring contest.

No one answered Astrid's question. Which only made her narrow her eyes and close her hands into fists as she stomped further into the Academy, detaching her axe from her back and throwing it to strike at the wall just a few inches from Fishlegs' head. Making the man flinch and then stand on both feet with just one quick jump. "I'm listening!"

"Doesn't seem like it." Astrid muttered, then glared down at Snotlout, who cleared his throat, sniffed quickly and then stood up on his feet. Hiding both hands behind his back and swaying back and forth. Starting to whistle as if nothing actually happened.

When Astrid turned her head at the twins, she said, "And what about \_you\_ two?"

"Shh...Can't now." Ruffnut said. "Staring contest."

"Yeah...shh..." Tuffnut said. Still well focused on his sister's stare.



As a result, Astrid just sighed aloud and rolled on her eyes before glancing back at the other two. Then relaxed her shoulders as she moved around the academy, searching for someone who clearly wasn't there. "Where's Eret?"

"Oh, you mean mister-\_I-am-better-than-you-all-because-I-have-a-nasty-chest-scar\_?" Snotlout began, seeming somewhat annoyed that Astrid was asking for the new member of the school. He then shrugged, "Who cares about him?"

"I do." Astrid said. Hoping her words didn't give Snotlout "or anyone else" the wrong idea.

"He said he would be assisting Gobber at the shop today." Fishlegs informed.

Astrid just nodded. Thinking Fishlegs could send Eret her message if needed. "Listen, we have to get ready for whatever is to come from the Hollibusians. We can't let ourselves be caught off guard like what happened when with Drago. Which is why we will start a special kind of training."

"What?!" Fishlegs exclaimed, alarmed. "\_How\_ will we be able to succeed this time? We have no backup and half of the island is still under construction."

"Uh, we have \_dragons\_, smartass." Ruffnut turned to face the rest. Making Tuffnut jump and raise his arms up in triumph.

"Yes! I won!" He yelled, then pointed at his sister. "You are a loser. Ha!"

Ruffnut narrowed her eyes at Tuffnut and drew her right arm back high and then fisted on his cheek. Knocking him down to the floor. "No, you blinked first."

"Shut up, you two!" Snotlout growled. Crossing his arms over his chest and then crouching down when a shield was thrown over his head. He brought both hands up to make sure his head was still attached to his neck and then frowned back at Tuffnut who was rubbing on his cheek with one hand while his other arm hung on his side.

"\_You\_ shut up." Tuffnut muttered.

"Would all of you just, quit it for one second!?" Fishlegs yelled all exasperated. "Gosh, I still can't believe that I haven't figured out how come I've tolerated all of you for all these years!"

"No one has figured that out just yet, Fishlegs." Astrid mumbled just for him to hear. Then chuckled aloud and drew in a deep breath before she could continue talking, "Anyway. Fishlegs is right. It might seem a little difficult to fight now that we are a little helpless but that doesn't mean we won't do our best to succeed this time without so much damage to take in. We might lack of some backups but that doesn't make us vulnerable, at all."

"So, what would you suggest then?" Snotlout asked.

"We will train double if needed." Astrid responded.

"But, we have to fortify the island." Fishlegs reminded her, "We can't just clone ourselves and do more than one thing at a time."

"Which is why we will take turns on every task." Astrid said.

"Explain yourself?" Tuffnut said.

Astrid frowned back at him, "May I truly?" She then shook her head. "For example, if I am helping Gobber at the shop today, then Fishlegs will train today. If Fishlegs will be helping Gobber out tomorrow, then I will train tomorrow."

"Nope. I still don't get it." Tuffnut said while slowly shaking his head side to side.

Before Astrid could even send a flying barrel straight at Tuffnut's head, another female voice stepped into their conversation as she made herself in. "We still need stronger dragons. If we want to succeed." As Valka came in, Cloudjumper moved to stand just a few feet from her as she walked to stand right in front of Astrid.

"But, Hiccup doesn't want to use dragons. He said he wants a fair fight." Fishlegs pointed out.

"Fishlegs, in this world, there is no such thing as a fair fight." Astrid assured while running two fingers over her forehead to remove her bangs from her eyelids. "Which is why Hiccup doesn't have to know about it. We will keep it as a tiny secret between us and keep the dragons hidden until we truly find ourselves in desperate need to use them."

"I have to agree with Astrid, there." Valka said. "We can't allow ourselves to trust on the quick thought that the Hollibusians might change their minds and go easy on us. We don't know what their plan is and we certainly don't know if they are gathering other tribes to help them fight against us."

"Which is why we must be well prepared." Astrid finished for her.

The twins and Snotlout shrugged after hearing the two ladies in apparent charge. As if they didn't even care if the world around them ever collapsed. Yet, Fishlegs still looked quite unsure about all of this. It wasn't that he didn't agree with the plan. It was just the fact that he had to play the part of a liar once again. Which wasn't exactly easy for him. Fishlegs was far too ingenuous. Even with almost twenty-one years of age, he still wasn't well considered as a good secret-keeper.

A part of Astrid, wanted to try and convince Hiccup into using dragons for their battle. While the other part of her, preferred to keep it as a secret for as long as possible. She very well knew Hiccup wanted a fair game, but Astrid didn't actually believe in fair plays. The safety of their village was everyone's concern. Astrid wasn't willing to let Berk be caught off guard once again.

Several seconds of silence between them only got her to sigh aloud and then finally added, "Just, leave Hiccup to me. If I choose to tell him about the dragons, or if he ever finds out, then let me be the one to change his mind and have him give into the idea. Deal?"

Fishlegs nodded in silence. Lowering his gaze. Trying to think of something to say before everyone else thought his tongue had been bitten off by a troll. Truth was, he didn't actually have anything else to say other than to keep on babbling on how risky it was for them to go behind the chief's back—which wouldn't exactly be the first time.

Astrid's hand found Valka's arm. Having the older woman turn her attention back to Her. "Valka," the girl breathed, trying to think of the right words to spread, "How many dragons can you train into titan size? At once, I mean."

Valka seemed to be taken aback by the question, hesitating for a few seconds before answering. Her voice a little shaken up, "Only one at a time. Training a dragon into a titan requires a lot of patience and skills. It is up to the dragon to decide whether it can move through the most impossible tasks."

"Unfortunately, we don't have very much time then. Do you think you can teach us how to train a dragon into that kind of size?" Astrid said.

"Good idea!" Fishlegs finally exclaimed. "That way, we can gain some more time at the same time as we gain power."

Astrid nodded in agreement. "Exactly. It would be best for us to train our own dragons into titans first and then, if Odin allows it, we may have some time left to train other dragons into titans."

"Wait, you said we wouldn't be training every single day. Right?" Snotlout asked. Now starting to get closer to them.

"I did." Astrid said.

"Then, how do you expect us to be ready for when we get attacked?" Snotlout asked.

"Simple." Fishlegs said, "By assigning the days of the week, for every task. That way, it'll be easier to remember what we should be doing."

"Right." Astrid added before anyone else would open their mouths to keep on asking and complaining. "On Moon's Days, we will all meet here in the academy two hours before sunup. That, will be our training day in the academy. Tiu's Days and Woden's Days we will all help with building the fort and gathering goods. Thor's Days, we wake up before sunup once again and train all day long out in the open. Finally on Frigga's, Saturn's and Sun's Days, we finish what is left of rebuilding houses and take care of all the things that may still need some attention from us. Understood?"

"This sounds boring!" Tuffnut yelled while raising both arms up high.

His knees flexed, chest forward and head back. Mouth vaguely opened.

"It's not supposed to be a game, you idiot." Ruffnut said. Crossing her arms over her chest.

Tuffnut's body turned to face his sister's. Glaring down at her. Balling his fists closed and waggling his shoulders slightly as if relaxing them before preparing to knock her down. "Who are you calling an idiot? \_Idiot\_"

"Who else!?" Ruffnut yelled back. Pushing her forehead against his own.

"Guys, please. Now is not the time to start a useless fight." Fishlegs said.

"Butt out!" Both twins snapped at the same time.

Astrid just sighed aloud, "Okay, now that things are well sorted out, I'm leaving."

"What?! You are leaving us here? Alone!?" Fishlegs asked. Trying not to make it too obvious to Astrid that what he actually meant, was that he wouldn't believe she was to leave him stuck alone with Snotlout and the twins.

Astrid simply nodded in response and gestured for Stormfly to approach her. "I have to measure the island with Hiccup. Besides, today is Saturn's Day. Also counts as helping out in the village."

"That said, I will also move on." Valka said while mounting on Cloudjumper. "I will be on the blacksmith's shop helping Gobber out."

When Astrid was already on Stormfly's back, she glared down at the rest of the gang, "Make sure I don't hear out that the members of this Academy are doing absolutely nothing productive for the village. Otherwise, I will make sure all of you stay in here with all the Terrible Terrors in the island for three days."

Being those her last words before she patted her left hand on Stormfly's neck, the dragon took off and soon, both of them disappeared into the skies. Few seconds later, Valka followed on Cloudjumper.

Astrid only hoped at least some of her instructions had been saved down in each of their heads and not just fly away with the wind. She hoped, that setting a nice schedule for all seven days of their week, would let them gain enough time to do as much as they could to prepare themselves for battle. Even if it sounded as something completely crazy to them. They just couldn't allow the island to fall into piecesâ€|not this time.

## 15. Hoard of Desires

Eleven days have passed since our wedding. Things have gone a little...\_hectic\_ for us all. Especially for Hiccup and I. Who

would've thought, that after the first day of being husband and wife, the doors to a very, very, very "tight schedule would bring themselves to finally open?

Hiccup, spent most of his time either at the Great Hall making sure everything was in order, or helping out with the construction of the forts. The only chance we had to exchange some words was during the day and it only happened if we were working together on something. Of course, most of what we talk about is Berk's current status and spraying down some ideas on how to improve it. Nothing more, nothing less.

Ah, let's not forget dinner time. Dinner time at the Great Hall became something completely sacred to us out of nowhere. Usually, I'm the one who finds him stuffing his mouth like a goddamned beast and sit right by him "To do basically the same thing. We rarely talked during dinner. Simply because we never had the chance to since we only rewarded ourselves no more than thirty minutes to eat like two desperate animals and then go back to mind our own business.

Despite our lack of time shared as a couple and the fact we only had enough alone time to go to sleep, well, instead of feeling angered "like how I used to get "the least I feel now is that, anger. Probably because now I don't have to ask him to stay in my bedroom for a while longer when I get oddly drunk and he's the only one to actually dare and tend to my unasked "and unwanted "necessities.

Times like these, where I find myself thinking back to when Stoick parted to Valhalla and Hiccup became busier than an elk running its soul away from the chances of being devoured by a starving wolf, make me realize how unfair I was not just to Hiccup, but also to myself. It wasn't until after having to sleep by his side every night without the need to wake up a few hours before everyone else does and sneak away in order to be unnoticed, that I found the actual chance to think on how despite his busy schedule, Hiccup always found a way to show how he cared, and how much he missed us being together.

At night, he usually comes home long hours after N3tt triumphantly drowns me into a deep sea of dreams "against my will. However, the scent of burnt coal showers me as soon as he lays by my side. His freezing and mistreated lips never fail to brush against my temples or cheeks while gentle fingers run up my spine and trap the hem of the blanket to protect my shoulders from the unforgiving cold.

Mornings where usually mine to take. There hasn't been a single day since we live under the same roof that Hiccup wakes up at the same time that I do. While I silently get dressed and ready to start my day, Hiccup groans and roars in a way that makes me think he has a living dragon inside that skinny body of his. Seriously. I always end up trying not to laugh at the sounds he makes while he sleeps, but if I dare say that this doesn't amuse me enough to make my day, then I'd be lying.

As previously planned, I've been waking up a few hours before sunup so the gang and I could train the dragons into a more powerful level without worrying too much about the risks of creating any kind of suspicion. Turns out that no one actually cares on what we do inside the Academy since everyone else is focused on their own business

concerning the preparations for a stronger Berk.

At times, the gang and I saw Berkians simulate a real fight in the beach's waters, others in the riskiest and most troublesome parts of the sand. One day, as I walked my way back home by Stormfly's side, I caught a glimpse of a bunch of children hiding behind the trees and sending cues to one another. At first, I thought that they were playingâ€”then I saw a hefty old man yelling his critics about the children's awful choice of hideout and defense. That was when I realized that they weren't playing \_at all\_.

No, they were also preparing themselves \_to\_ \_fight\_. What disturbed me the most, was that their age didn't even seem to be over six.

Yeah, I started training and fighting trees with a knife when I was fourâ€”but I was \_forced\_ into it. Mom said that if I didn't prove myself strong enough, then she would have me know the true meaning of pain and misery. She always said that tears represented weakness, and that \_weakness\_, was her greatest enemy.

I was grooming Stormfly, outdoors by the house when suddenly the same words that have been tormenting me as I grew up haunted my thoughts once again. "\_If ye ever dare ta show me weakness, Astrid, at that fair second, you will no longer be my daughter."\_

I tried to replace my mom's voice in my head with the memory of my last sexual moment with my current husband. Who could ever thought that thinking about such things would make my heart race without a single hesitation?

I remember it clearly and am proud enough to replay it in my head every once in a while. It was the morning after our wedding night, when Hiccup suddenly got all maddeningly curious over my SnowBell tea. Well, considering the consequences he had to go through after tasting it, I believe I wouldn't have to worry anymore about him snooping on me like that.

As I finally shook all those sudden thoughts away and tried harder to clear my mind for at least a few minutes, my hand regained its strengths to rub the sponge a little harder on Stormfly's harsh parts.

Remembering the main reason why \_everyone\_ has been so busy these past few days. Sighs, "Don't worry, Stormfly. We \_will\_ win this time." I averted my eyes to the far, distant sun that started to hide behind a large group of dark clouds before mumbling the last part to myselfâ€”almost in disbeliefâ€”"That, I can promise you."

No, I didn't even \_believe\_ my own words. They tasted far too sweet to be mineâ€”or true.

Stormfly's questionable moan confirmed my thoughts.

Our reality, Berk is not on fair conditions that are anywhere near appropriate for another battle. Drago, basically weakened our grounds with the Bewilderbeast's ice. It has taken us months to rebuild homes that wouldn't fall apart just a few weeks after being done thanks to unstable grounds. It has also taken us months to harvest goods for our very survival through the unforgivingâ€”and still

upcomingâ€”winter months. And we are \_still\_ not ready.

On top of that, it has become a royal pain in the ass to train dragons behind Hiccup's back. Thankfully, Hiccup hasn't found out about the plan on keeping the dragons as a last resource in battle if we ever find ourselves in such a bad shape that we could use their help.

I despise the fact that I have to sleep next to the guy I've been honest with my entire life and then all of the sudden, am hiding how I've structured a plan of attack for the dragons already. Good thing he comes home far after I've already fallen asleep and that I wake up far earlier than he does. This, has been the only way I could keep myself from spitting the beans out.

Every time I look into his eyes, those little cheerful smiles he sends me every now and then during the day have only gotten me to feel especially steamed with myself. Even though part of me hates me for being such a terrible wife, \_great\_ part of me is starting to think of ways to tell him the truth without angering him for lying.

It was sickening meâ€”to think that I, his mother and childhood friends have been training dragons into Titan Sizes behind his back. Shit, I can't even bring myself to look at him in the eye for more than two seconds whenever we are up close.

Sighing once again, remembering how I am supposed to finish taking care of Stormfly and patrol around the island's northern region before nightfall, I placed the sponge down on the ground and then walked to the basket full of cooked chicken. Opening the lid, digging my hand in and pulling out a drumstick, I said, "Say, do you think he had lunch today?"

Stormfly tilted her head to the right. It even seemed clear to me that Stormfly noticed how I was trying to deviate the war of pointless thoughts in my head in order to feel at least a tiny bit better from the guilt that had been selfishly consuming me for almost two weeks.

But Stormfly didn't fall for it. She just lowered her head a little at me and then groaned within in what sounded more like \_shame\_.

Managing a playful pout at her, I waved the drumstick up and downâ€”to tease herâ€”and said, "Are you mocking me?" then huffed within before shrugging my right shoulder and throwing the drumstick up in the high air, "I say you're spending an awfully large amount of time with Toothlessâ€”not to mention that you actually \_sleep\_ with him."

"Well, you said it yourself. They sleep together now that we have a new home to share." Hiccup's voice froze my entire body stiffâ€”except for my eyes that followed the chicken that fell right into Stormfly's mouth. "â€”and yes, I already ate. But thank you for your concern." He finished.

My eyes widened, feeling as if they almost fell from my skull. Somehow, I soon managed toâ€”slowlyâ€”turn my head over my left shoulder just to see Hiccup headed my way with a quite disturbing

grin tattooed on his face as he carried a small-sized fish basket in his hands. Toothless followed him.

Few seconds later, my head moved to the right, then to the left. Unsure whether he was actually there and talking to me, or that I had finally allowed my constant thoughts of him fool me right into permanent madness.

Seeing my sudden reaction, Hiccup laughed. Not really helping it as he placed the basket on the ground and dusted his chest and forearms.

When I finally realized I've been shocked into silence for long enough, I shook my thoughts away and turned to finally face him. "Hiccup, what a surprise. What brings you here?"

"Oh, Toothless and I went fishing." Hiccup answered. Sitting on the ground by the fish basket. He crossed his legs and then teasingly pointed at Toothless, "He wanted to eat everything we got in the basket so I thought it'd be best to bring it home before all the fish mysteriously disappear."

Hearing that, Toothless rolled his eyes and released a low unhappy growl before laying on the ground a few feet from his rider.

I grinned at them both, "I bet."

Then, after a wide smile from Hiccup's lips and a brief moment of silence, Hiccup's eyes blinked in recognition as he took a good look at the dragon being fed by his wife "Wow..."

"What?" I asked while throwing another drumstick at the Deadly Nadder. "What is it?"

"I'm not sureâ€|" He slowly stood up from the ground, "Hey, has Stormfly gotten bigger?"

Uh, ohâ€|â€|" I thought, cleared my throat and responded, "I-I've been feeding her just chicken lately, so it must be it."

"Probablyâ€|" Hiccup mumbled while approaching my dragon. "She looks a lot stronger as well."

"Why thank you. She appreciates that very much." A drop of pride slipping from my lips as I looked up at my dragon, "Right girl?"

Stormfly roared in awe and moved her head back and forth as a response before moving her head closer to me hoping to get more food.

"I believe you might appreciate it more than what she does." Hiccup teased.

"Could be true." I shrugged, though I was actually trying to hold back the desires to laugh. It had been a while since we've mocked one another just for our own amusement.

As I crouched to grab another drumstick, Hiccup began walking around



us. Observing and studying the blue Deadly Nadder's dramatic change. Slowly and carefully running his fingers down her wing, feeling how unbelievably thick she had gotten and how shiny her skin was. "How could she get this big and beautiful in such a short time?"

I pouted at him, "Uh, excuse me?" Flicks tongue, "â€œBut Stormfly has always been the most beautiful of all the dragons in all the land."

Hiccup snickered at that and nodded, "Well, I can't argue with that when it comes to you, now can I?"

"Nope."

"Haha, fine, I won't then. But still..." He looked back at my dragon and continued searching for unknown things. "This is strange, I've never seen a Deadly Nadder look this mighty."

My chest tightened. My teeth found my bottom lip and soon sent it into yet another torturous biting session. His constantâ€œand unusualâ€œfocus on Stormfly was starting to send annoying shivers down my spine.

Watching how he measured Stormfly's darkerâ€œand a lot sharperâ€œspines made my stomach burn. Is he onto me? And why wasn't Stormfly even reacting to his touch!?

He must be studying her. Again. It's fine. Must be for the Book of Dragons so it's nothing unusual.â€œ\_I thought. Trying not to seem too obvious and let him know that him being around me like that at the moment actually made me feel amazingly nervous.

When my head turned to find Toothless, I shot him a scary glare after seeing him lay on his stomach, his chin resting on his paws, eyes up at Stormfly and spreading a quirky smile that showed his bare gums. Emitting lowâ€œmockingâ€œlaughs.

Why do I get the feeling something is up between these two dorks?

Soon, a loud exhale broke the silence between the four of us. I dropped my arms on either sides and glanced up at my dragon before forcing a heavy hand up to Stormfly's chin. Absently rubbing it. "Um...Hiccup?"

"Hm?"

Even though he dropped his attention from the Nadder, I just couldn't bring myself to look directly at him just yet. The feeling was so irritating that I just couldn't take it anymore. "There is something I haven't told youâ€œ|"

"Mhmm...?"

"The reason why Stormfly is this big is...well..." My eyes moved up to find him standing right in front of me now. His facial features were sereneâ€œtoo much for my taste. Squeezing my eyes shut, my mouth opened once again, "â€œ|the gang, your mom, and I have been training our dragons into Titans."

\_There, I said it. Way to go, Astrid! So much for being a good secret keeper and hide a small and simple lie from your husband\_â€"I thought.

Hiccup didn't answer so soon. He turned to glance back at Stormfly and started to rub on the pearl-white skin of her chin. After a fewâ€"endlessâ€"seconds of silence between us, Hiccup breathed out the words, "I knew that."

\_Wait, what!?!â€"\_I yelled in my head.

"H-huh?" I gagged.

"I said, I knew that." He repeated himself.

"W-wait, h-how did you know?" I blinked blankly at him, not really helping the shock.

"Fishlegs told me."

My blood rushed back to my face, my knuckles cracked aloud as I narrowed my eyebrows at him,â€"\_Fishlegs, huh? He's a dead radishâ€"|\_â€"I thought.

The silent plan of how to intelligently stitch Fishlegs' lips together seemed to have hit Hiccup's attention as he came in closer and chuckled before turning his gaze back at Stormfly. "Don't blame it on him, he nearly begged me not to show you that I knew anything about this. Well...um, actually, he did beg me not to show you that I knew anything about this..." He muttered the last.

I breathed in deep, "Since when exactly do you know about this?"

Hiccup shrugged, "About a week ago. Almost two, I guess."

"Wait, does this mean you knew everything about our plan ever since it was originated?" I asked.

Hiccup nodded, "Yup."

"So, you being all amazed on Stormfly's sudden change has been just a set up? All this time, you were pretending to be surprised?"

"Yup."

"Butâ€" "

"I was hoping that if I was onto you, then you'd tell me the truth for once and all." Pauses, "Sorry, I just couldn't help it. I grew impatient and tried to find the right way to trick you into telling me the truth." He said.

"You've been pushing my sense of guilt further into a limit?" I asked.

"Worked, didn't it?" He grinned mischievously.

I had no other choice but to tilt my head to the side and nod once,

"Clever boy..." Mutters.

"Actually, what truly surprises me, is how \_you've\_ managed to keep it to yourself for so long." He said.

Carefully studying his expression before my eyes, I noticed he didn't show any signs of anger or disappointment. His features were justâ€¦|\_perplexed. \_Then I realized I didn't have much of a choice but to be entirely honest with him from now on, "Aren't you upset?" I asked.

Hiccup shook his head in slow denial.

"May I know why?" I asked.

He shruggedâ€"again. "Come on, Astrid. You are highly predictable." He said, "I expected this to happen so why would I be upset?" He didn't even let me answer his statement since he just continued, "Trust me, the \_least\_ I am is upset. What I do feel is a little disappointed that you didn't trust me your plan of readying the dragons just in case we ever come to the grave position of needing them."

"I just, knew you wouldn't agree to it." I mumbled.

He grinned, finding both of my hands and lacing his fingers with mine, "I wouldn't. And to be honest, I still don't think using dragons is the best idea since it would be unfair to use them against people...But, yet again, it's \_you\_ we are talking about."

I rolled my eyes before pushing my chin up in apparent pride.

Then, the way he tilted his head to the side and moved his eyes away made me blink in question, as he continued talking "Though, I wish you had trusted me with this kind of plan from day one..." His gaze found mine once again, "Makes me feel a little left out."

I flicked my tongue and slightly gripped his hands, "It hasn't been easy for me, Hiccup, I even tried to figure out ways to tell you." My head moved to the side and my eyes found the distant sky, "...The thought of you getting steamed up at me was all that kept me from saying a word." Looks back at him. "I just couldn't bear the thought of getting into a fight with you."

Hiccup's expression relaxed, his right hand released my own and I soon felt his fingers run up my arm and rest on the back of my neck, "I wouldn't bear it either."

His face got closer to mine, my hands seemed to move by themselves when they slid around his waist and pulled him closer. Just as our lips were about to touch, Hiccup's name was heard from the distance. He whined within. I closed my eyes in disappointment.

"This can't be happening nowâ€" I muttered to myself. Great, forgot how he was the chief and how we are in the middle of preparing for a war.

Hiccup rose his hand and scratched the back of his head as he looked at me apologetically before mumbling something about having to take care of some things.

I pouted at him and when he started to turn his body away, I grabbed his arm, pulled him back to me, rested my other hand on the back of his neck and crashed my lips against his.

Hearing him release a soft and quick moan made me smile. Eventually, our kiss grew stronger and more passionate until we both found the missing courage to pull away from each other and glued our foreheads together.

"I won't be home late tonight." He breathlessly whispered.

"You better not." I equally breathed out.

He pecked my lips one last time, nodded many short times and as I lightly began to laugh at his reddened cheeks, Hiccup skipped away from me and ran towards Toothless who was standing by Stormfly.

My precious Deadly Nadder was flapping her wings in a flattering way while the Night Fury was grinning at both of us.

\_Oh, those two!\_â€"I thought. Knowing the dragons always found it enjoying to mock us when we are in \_the mood\_.

\* \* \*

><p>Few hours later, Hiccup was gazing out at the dense dark gray sheet of clouds that draped over the island of Berk as he sat on Toothless' back. They were on a hill that had a perfect view down to Eret's boat.<p>

The buff man, was carrying two logs in his arms and as he walked across the boat, he threw them down by the doors of the main cabin. He dusted his hands and then went over to the masts.

"No matter what has happened before, Toothless, he seems to be the only man that can help us the most." Hiccup mumbled to his dragon, who had tilted his head backwards to take a look at his rider and started making soft dragon sounds of apparent insecurity and unease.

Noticing the dragon's behavior, Hiccup forced a smile down at him and soon brought his hand to Toothless' nose and petted him as he said, "Relax, bud. Remember, he's one of us now." Exhaling aloud, Hiccup then petted on Toothless' sides and took a grip on his saddle "Come on, let's get this over with."

Toothless nodded once, narrowed his eyebrows and jumped from the hill, gliding down and landing on Eret's boat. Making the man startle himself as he instantly drew his knife from the back of his belt and turned around to face the strangers.

Seeing who his visitors were, Eret relaxed his shoulders and cleared his throat, "Ah, my chief." bowing his head before Hiccup and Toothless, "To what do I owe the honor of your visit?"

"Good day, Eret son of Eret." Hiccup greeted, nodding his head once and quickly dismounting Toothless. "I thought you'd be at home."

Eret chuckled. Taking a few steps backwards and leaned his bum against the railings of the ship. Palming three times on the wood beside him as he talked, "Well I cannot just forget about my loyal companion. A good sailor's best friend is his ship."

"I'm sure it is." Hiccup responded. Trying to sound as polite as he could, rather than tired and drained—as he actually felt.

As a result, Eret simply bowed his head in appreciation. Then, Hiccup took the chance to strike at the reason why he was visiting the new dragon rider. "I came to ask for a favor."

Eret's eyes blinked twice in surprise. His head straight forward as he parted his lips to say "Do tell, chief. Anything."

Hiccup just nodded, sighing out the words, "I trust you may have great knowledge of the seas and oceans." His eyes moved up. Finding Eret's gaze. His facial features serious and firm. "Would you go meet with the other clans and on my behalf, seek for an answer of support for Berk?"

The question seemed to have taken Eret off guard. For he relaxed his arms on either of his sides and sighed aloud. Pressing his left heel against the railings behind him and pushing himself forward. "I would." He answered. Bringing his hand up to his chin, absently rubbing it. "But, I have a question myself."

"Yes?"

"Out of all overly experienced sailors you have in this island, why come to me?"

Hiccup didn't exactly wait to think of an answer. He just, made his gaze follow the man's every move. "Because even the best sailors on this island, prefer to travel on Dragons. It is faster, yes. But risky. You have been living overseas for years, I trust you know how to survive and defend yourself out there without being seen as a threat so fast." Breathes, "And besides, I need them here for now."

"Wait, risky you say?" Eret asked.

"Yes." Hiccup confirmed. "If we expose dragons to people that still don't have any idea of what it is to live among them, then we might scare them off before we can make them our allies. I think, it is best to do things slowly and make sure nothing goes wrong."

Eret stayed in silence for a few seconds. Trying to dig into the thought of talking with other chiefs into helping Berk. Which, wasn't exactly a bad idea. Berk needed the help. They had almost all forts and houses rebuilt, but they still needed to rely on a good amount of warriors strong enough to take down those that dare to interfere and attack.

"You can take Skullcrusher with you. That way you won't exactly feel all alone on the way. Just make sure no one sees him." Hiccup said.

"I will." Eret said. "And when time demands it, I will send him back to Berk with news of my journey."

"Excellent." Hiccup said, "Do it as soon as you've talked with both chiefs."

"Both?" Eret asked. "Just, how many places do you wish for me to go?"

"I want you to meet with clans Feyvor and Smorton." Hiccup answered. "To meet clan Feyvor, you must go to The Island of Icso. As for the clan of Smorton, the brightest star to your left will lead you to the Island of Larils. It is not a long journey. On a dragon, it may take no more than a day. Which means it'll take you about four to five days if the waters are kind."

"Wait. Weren't those the ones that requested for a visit to discuss matters of protection and alliance and then rejected us after considering the facts dragons aren't a threat to us no more but that they still weren't convinced?" "Ai, something like that?" Eret recalled. Suddenly glaring once he saw Hiccup nod at him, confirming everything he had just said.

"But, chief. How can you possibly?"

"I want to give it one last try." Hiccup cut him off. "Something tells me, that if we try just one more time, we might succeed."

Eret sighed once again. Shaking his head, unsure of everything that involved trying to talk some other Viking into enjoying a Dragon's company. It sounded reckless...Hel, it had always been reckless. Maddening. Suicidal. Unacceptable.

"Chief," Eret breathed, "You do realize that last time you tried to talk other Vikings into accepting dragons as equals, you almost lost the woman you now call wife, right?" Here again, circumstances that were similar to what they were experiencing now, made Eret also end up riding a dragon himself.

After receiving a regretful nod from his chief as a response, Eret sighed aloud. Thinking that as crazy as this plan sounded, he was no one to skip into conclusions that weren't at all that true. Simply, because he wouldn't know what to expect. "If that is your wish, then I better get moving."

Relief embraced the one-legged Viking Chief as soon as his ears heard the words spread from the rider in front of him. "You have more than enough time to get all the supplies you need. Leave tomorrow morning. The sooner, the better. Make sure you're back home before the waters turn into solid ice." As the chief spoke, he moved back to Toothless, who was just watching both men in silence.

Mounting Toothless, Hiccup petted on the dragon's sides so he would prepare himself for takeoff when Eret rushed himself towards the dragon and waved his hands at the chief. "Wait, Hiccup."

Hiccup glanced back down at him. Tilting his head to the side in utter curiosity. "Uh, yeah?"

"We have been terribly busy lately and I haven't had the chance to congratulate you for your marriage with the lady Astrid." Eret said, "I am really glad she didn't marry Osch's son and that it all just

seems to be a nightmare that is soon to end."

Nodding, Hiccup quickly chewed on his lower lip. Not exactly knowing what to answer to that. He too, was especially glad that he was the one who got the privilege to marry the one he always wanted. He had said it before, he wasn't looking forward into hearing on a near future that she was bearing another man's child. Especially if it had been fully against her own will. The thought of it only sickened him.

"Thanks." Were the only words he could allow himself to release before rubbing on Toothless' scales, "Let's go bud."

In no less than another minute, Hiccup and Toothless were already flying through the dense sheet of clouds draped over Berk. Truth was, Hiccup wasn't exactly the kind of guy that would talk his feelings with others. He always trusted that his matters with Astrid were just theirs. Gobber, was actually the only one other than Astrid that Hiccup would feel comfortable enough to talk about his feelings towards her. And it was simply because Gobber was terribly good at twisting things up and getting the words out of him without making so much of an effort.

Now, it was only the thought of not having the chance to talk to her about his days at work that bothered him. It started to feel uncomfortable having to wake up and not see her laying by his side, then come back home late enough to find her asleep. He missed her. He missed her cheerful voice, her daily laughter, her playful violence, her kisses—he missed his wife.

At the sound of Toothless' sudden groans of concern as soon as he noticed his rider's unusual silence, Hiccup chuckled down at his dragon and shook his head before leaning forward and whispering, "Toothless, we have to find them. Quick."

Toothless' eyes shot back ahead as he nodded firmly and pushed himself to fly even faster. Letting the memory of the last time he spent by Stormfly's side be his guide to her.

\* \* \*

><p>"Do you think you can get us some apples to snack on?"<p>

Hearing her, Stormfly tilted her head to the side as she watched her rider climb down from a pine tree.

Not really making even the smallest effort to move and at least search for the apples Astrid had asked for, Stormfly simply stayed standing down below. Making Astrid loudly release a loud sigh, she grabbed a pine cone and threw it down at Stormfly's forehead. Then laughed it off, "I'll be fine. Just, go on."

Stormfly tilted her head to the other side.

Knowing what her dragon was waiting for in order to move away from the tree, Astrid pouted down at her before rolling her eyes and then look back down at the dragon, "Please?"

With that, Stormfly hummed cheerfully and turned around, starting to

stomp away from the pine tree.

The girl growled within herself and then shouted out back at the dragon as it disappeared into the woods, "\_Definitely\_ spending too much time with Toothless, you know that?"

The Deadly Nadder didn't even react to Astrid's tease. She just continued walking away and left the rider all by herself on the fields of an island near Berk's north coast. The island was called Elipso. It wasn't \_that\_ big. You could take a good look at the entire thing from Astrid's current spot. Yeah, it sounds crazy, but true. Not even many animals lived there. Berkians used Elipso as a good spot for watching over ships that would come near Berk from the northern region.

It was Astrid's turn to guard the northern regions of Berk. After riding on Stormfly's back nearly all day long over the entire northern half of Berk's grounds, Astrid decided to take a few hours of rest from the skies. That way, she would let Stormfly rest her wings for a while and Astrid could keep doing her job.

Being alone and away from everyone else, only got Astrid to replay over and over in her head all those nice and little things that had happened in the past few days. Like, having to secretly manage a way to convince the witnesses of their wedding that she and Hiccup were well capable of consummating their marriage like two Viking Champions without the need to be \_supervised\_.

It was a little tricky, to form a plan that would make the witnesses \_believe\_ Hiccup and Astrid could manage their first night together on their own. But as you could see back there, it wasn't impossible.

On the day of their wedding, during Hiccup's bath hour, he and Gobber talked of things that could give Hiccup at least the slightest bits of ideas on how Viking men should please a woman in order to keep her happy. That was when Hiccup shared on how he knew Astrid's happiness wasn't based on how many times he touched her, or on the way he kissed her. The only way he could keep his girl as happy as ever, was by doing what he always didâ€”to be \_himself\_.

Yet, being himself wasn't exactly \_enough\_ to convince the witnesses that their marriage wasn't a game. Gobber then came up with this strategy for Hiccup to follow. Though, it wasn't easy to take in considering Gobber's position in societyâ€”single.

In the meantime, Astrid was left alone with Valka and Ruffnut while being dressed for the big hour. The bride revealed how uncomfortable she had been feeling ever since she heard she had to allow Hiccup make love to her in front of so many people. Especially, in front of those whom she could consider close and as part of her family. It was when Valka suggested her to be herself. To allow the feeling of being with her husband take away all fears and simply let him make all the moves. But, the advice wasn't enough for Astrid to settle. In the end, the couple seemed to have only remembered enough to scare the others away from their bedroom and simply let them be. \_Thankfully\_.

Back then, she did feel awkward most of the time knowing she was being observed. However, it was a moment of her life she would never



trade for all the gold in the world.

Remembering such, made Astrid release a slight giggle as she climbed down from the tree, detached her axe from her back, sat on the ground with both legs crossedâ€"knee over ankleâ€"laid the axe on her lap, and started removing the small bits of soil from the blade.

The sound of Stormfly's long steps getting louder by the second, made Astrid glance over her shoulder and widen her eyes in shock as she saw her dragon return with an apple \_tree\_ in her mouth.

"Whatâ€" "

Astrid didn't even know what to say. For the moment, all she could do was observe how the Blue Deadly Nadder stood just a few feet behind her, lowered her head to the ground and opened her mouth. Letting the tree carefully fall from her long and sharp teeth.

"A whole tree!?" Astrid moved the axe from her lap and placed it on the ground by her before standing up and dusting on her buttocks as she slowly moved toward the tree rich in red apples. She stretched an arm out to one of the branches, picked out the lightest apple and rubbed it clean against her tunic before bringing it up to her lips and taking a bite. "Mm..." Her eyes squeezed shut as she chewed. "A bit bitter." Her left eye then opened first and after she swallowed, she smiled brightly at her big girl. "Just the way I like it. Thank you."

Astrid then offered the dragon her apple. "Want some?"

Stormfly huffed within and as she made herself comfortable on the ground, she turned her head away from the rider. Displeased.

Astrid smirked. She tilted her head down to try and find Stormfly's gaze once again. "You know, apples are really tasty. Especially while still being green. Don't forget that they also stand for wisdom."

"Grawn-gawk-gwruun..." Stormfly growled. Still refusing to look at her rider.

Astrid blinked twice before straightening her back again and then rolled her eyes. Taking another bite on her apple. "I know, I know." Walking back to their bag of supplies which she kept by a boulder just a few feet from them, "You are a carnivore. You love meat as much as I love a good fight."

Taking one last bite from the apple before tossing it to the distance, Astrid kneeled by the beige-leather bag of supplies and started searching for the chicken drumstick inside. When she pulled the meat out, Astrid stood back up and looked back at the dragonâ€"who had been now and then throwing glances at her rider. "Ha, here beautiful. All yours."

At the sound of Astrid's words, Stormfly immediately stood from her spot and stomped toward Astrid.

The girl threw the chicken up high. In mid-air, Stormfly shot a ball of fire at the meat, then as it fell down againâ€"all roastedâ€"the dragon opened its big mouth and waited for the meat to fall inside.

As a result, Astrid cheerfully applauded and then skipped to her dragon, rubbing frantically on her scales. "That's my girl."

The sudden sounds of the wind being pierced by an impossibly fast black dragon made both females turn their heads up just to see a Night Fury headed to their direction. The rider dismounted the dragon as soon as it's feet hit the ground. "Here you are." The rider said while taking his mask off and walking toward Astrid and her dragon.

"I told Gobber this morning I'd be guarding today." Astrid said. Surprised he'd been searching for her when he probably knew exactly where she'd be.

"He didn't specify the region when I asked." Hiccup recalled. "Toothless tracked you."

Astrid just carelessly shrugged. Then smiled back at him once he reached her and stood right in front of her. His face was all covered in charcoal dust. His chest rose and fell uncontrollably, showing how fatigued he must be feeling after rushing himself to her. His eyes glistened. As if he had just turned into a child who was all excited to see someone or something he'd been longing for. When her eyes moved down to his hands, she noticed that his fingers were slightly twitching and his knees struggling to keep his body straight up. "Hiccup..." She began, taking his mask from his hand and holding it in hers as she used her other hand to take a gentle hold of his. "...Are you alright?"

Concerned, her eyes searched all over him for an answer that would sound logical enough to convince her that he wasn't feeling ill or weak all of the sudden.

Hiccup, seemed to be taken aback by her question. His fingers grasped on her hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing it gently. "I'm fine." He honestly sighed the words against her skin. "Just, a little tired after going here and there all day long."

"Aah..." She breathed. Then chuckled, smirking up at him. "Apple?"

"Huh?"

"Would you like an apple?" She asked.

"Uh...sure?" When Hiccup turned around once Astrid let go of his hand and moved back to the apple tree, his eyes widened in surprise as he watched her pick the apples. "Where did \_that\_ come from?"

"Stormfly brought it for me." Astrid responded as she picked two apples that weren't too red nor too green. "But I can't just eat all these by myself, can I?"

Hiccup shrugged a shoulder, "We could take a few home."

"Right." Astrid agreed. Walking away from the tree and sitting back where she left her axe. She placed the apples on the ground and then slid her right hand inside her right boot, pulling out a dagger.

Hiccup glanced over to see their dragons run one another around the field before he licked on his lips and walked back to Astrid. Sitting right by her side. Watching how she grabbed one apple, rubbed it clean against her tunic and then began to peel itâ€”impressively quick.

"What are you doing here?" Astrid asked. Her entire attention in the apple she was peeling.

Hiccup brought a hand up to his chin and scratched on it, "Well, I remember promising a certain person I'd be home early today and since I finished most of my tasks for the day, I thought it might be nice to find her and go home together."

"Ah," She said. Then grinned, "Good idea," offers him a slice. "That way we could \_race\_ back."

Hiccup pouted at her, taking the slice from her and bringing it to his lips after saying "Why is it always a competition with you?"

Astrid made up a hurt expression at him. "What is wrong with competing? You know it's a great way to relieve stress."

Hiccup didn't answer. He just shook his head and took a bite from his slice. He knew very well, that she was right. Hel, she usually is. Yet, even if she wasn't right, Hiccup wasn't in the mood to say otherwise. He wanted to enjoy these tiny minutes with her just as they were. Simply silent, eating apples while feeling the cold breeze caress the skins of their faces and necks. Watching the sun gradually hiding behind the fine line that divided the skies from the oceans.

They didn't talk about much that afternoon while still being in Elipso. They just allowed themselves be drowned within the sounds of nature surrounding them. As for when the moon finally emerged from her secret hideout, Hiccup was already rubbing on his eyes and letting his back fall against Astrid's arm. That was when Astrid asked the dragons to come closer and told Hiccup that it might be best if they just returned to the village.

Surprisingly, Hiccup still had some energies left to race his wife back home. When Astrid noticed Toothless had been speeding from her and Stormfly, she snickered and petted her dragon into speeding up until both dragons were racing peak to peak. Who won? Hard to decide on who won and who lost when Gobber suddenly appeared out of nowhere, standing by the well near Hiccup and Astrid's house. Making both dragons drastically decelerate, crash against each other and then down against the ground. The belt adjusted to Toothless' saddle, kept Hiccup from harming himself. But Astrid fell off her dragon and rolled down the hill until her back banged against a boulder in her way.

"Astrid!" Hiccup yelled. Dismounting Toothless and rushing down to her. Gobber simply stayed on his spot. Watching how Hiccup's prosthetic leg slipped on the cold ground and almost fell on his bum before reaching for Astrid. He \_didn't\_ fall. He only lost his balance for a quick second, then allowed his knees to crash against the ground as he turned the girl's body to him. "Astrid?"

As his desperate heartbeats wouldn't allow him to hear the sounds of her groaning, Hiccup moved her head to him and rested it on his thighs. Trying to keep her neck straight so she wouldn't hurt herself from a bad move. His eyes searched for injuries all over her body. But she seemed to have none. "Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No." Her eyes opened to find his frightened expression. Making her form a mocking smirk up at him, "I'm not made out of glass, Hiccup. Though I wonder what was so important that a walking rock got in our way."

"Ei, if yeh two were at home instead of goofing around, then this walking rock wouldn't be getting in ye'r way too often." Gobber responded while finally walking to them and resting both hands on his sides.

Astrid pushed herself from the ground and stood back up. Dusting her clothes and then glancing back at Gobber. "What is it Gobber?" she asked.

"Eret left." Gobber said. Making both vikings shoot shocked stares up at him. So he continued, "Erm, about two hours ago. Fishlegs followed him. Soon after, Snotlout and the twins also tagged along."

"Not surprised." Hiccup muttered. More to himself.

"What?" Astrid glanced back at Hiccup, then back at Gobber. "Where did they go?"

"I-I-um...I kinda asked Eret to leave as soon as he could and search for some help from the other clans." Hiccup explained. Self-consciously scratching on his temple. Trying to avoid eye contact with Astrid as he talked. "Thought it might be useful to get more Vikings on our side if Osch truly plans to attack us."

Astrid didn't say anything for a while. She just huffed within and relaxed her shoulders before crossing her arms over her chest. "Those spineless rascals. Always finding a way to sneak out of training and work."

"Seems like it." Gobber agreed. Knowing she was actually referring to the gang.

Hiccup chuckled, "Well, why don't you look at it from a brighter angle?" He asked her.

Astrid just pouted up at him. So Hiccup quickly continued talking, trying not to make himself gag while it, "...I mean...um...uh...well...you know, now you may have more time to rest from training so hard and you'll be able to assist me or Gobber on other tasks."

As much as Astrid wanted to admit Hiccup was right, all she could actually think of was the fact she was now free to rest from Snotlout and the twins for a few more days. Which pleased her much more than she could hope. But, the thought of being short of time to train and become better prepared warriors made her feel at unease as well.

Gobber carelessly shrugged and turned his back on them, starting to walk down the hill. "Anyway, you two get some rest. I just wanted to tell you that."

Hiccup frowned. "That's still not important enough to ruin our race."

Gobber just laughed mischievously as he walked away. Leaving the couple behind. Astrid rolled her eyes, chuckled and then turned to face Hiccup. Taking his hand in hers, she wrapped it around her waist and smiled innocently at him. "Let's go home now. Shall we?" She said, having him relax his frown and return the smile as he began walking with her back up the hill.

Once they reached the cabin, they both noticed that Toothless was waiting for Stormfly to get comfortable in their hut so he could also get in. Astrid and Hiccup waved their good nights at the dragons before Hiccup moved away from Astrid and closed the two big doors of the dragon's hut.

Inside the house, Astrid waited for Hiccup to walk in so she could close the front door. When he came in, she closed the door and flipped the key to lock it.

"I'm going to wash myself a little." He said, starting to climb up the stairs. Astrid nodded and followed him in silence.

Few minutes later, Hiccup's body froze in front of the closed washroom door from their room. His hand hung on the handle and his eyes stared down at it.

\_What am I doing?\_He thought\_finally we are both alone, wide awake and all we've done is behave like siblings.\_

Turning just enough to glance over his shoulder, and back at her, he found her giving her back to him, standing by the closed window as she took her boots off and placed them one by the other on the floor. The belt around her waist loosened and fell to the floor along with her skirt.

Hiccup turned his head back to the door in front of him, closed his eyes and slowly released a soft exhale.

\_She must be as tired as I am\_He thought\_best if just let her rest...\_

Pushing the door open, he went in and closed the door just enough not to bother Astrid with any of the sounds he made in there while bathing. Thinking that it might be wrong of him to ask her to join him, Hiccup moved to the tub and picked up the buckets filled with water on a corner, pouring them down into the tub to fill it. Ever since they became one for the first time, his body had begun yearning for more of hers. He couldn't understand why this was happening to him. It was terribly hard not to think of the last time they were together as husband and wife. Fulfilling their role as \_mates\_. Now, they were so busy and tired that all he could bring himself to do was to treat her as a close friend.

What he didn't know at the moment, was that as he slowly undressed himself in utter silence, through the gap that was left open between

the door and the frame, a certain damsel had been watching him. Her eyes uncontrollably studied every detail of his figure as if it had been the very first time she sees a man stripping from his layers. A strange feeling, yes, yet fascinating at the same time.

She could see everything. The marks on his back that confirmed he might be buckling his flight suit just a little too tight, the hair that was now long enough to rub against the lowest of the back of his neck, the strâ€œ

"Astrid?" Her body moved away and hid against the wall as soon as she saw his body start turning and his head snap back at the door in curiosity.

Her face flushed in dark red and her fingers battled between themselves, "Uh, y-yes?" She gagged. Shuffling her feet backwards and as far away from the washroom as she could bring herself to.

Hiccup didn't respond. He stayed glancing at the door. Curious enough to begin walking forward and confirm the feeling of someone watching him. But as he got close enough to the almost closed door, he sighed within, shook his head and turned on his heel, getting inside the tub and starting to scrub his body. "Never mind..." he said.

Astrid exhaled aloudâ€œ"relieved. "Why am I feeling so nervous?" She whispered to herself, frowning at the thought of it, "That's just, stupid."

As dumb and annoying as it might feel to her, the unwelcoming shyness that suddenly caved in her, wasn't at all that easy to get rid of. So she just shook her head in denial of the feeling and walked out of the room.

Several minutes later, the washroom's door opened and Hiccup came out. Wearing just his usual trousers and a dark green tunic. His hair was dripping wet and he wore a sock on his good foot. His eyes immediately searched for her. But he couldn't find her.

"Astrid?" He called. Seeing how her clothes were well folded on the chair by the window, he knew she couldn't have just left the house. "Astrid?" He called again, this time a little louder.

"Here."

Her voice made him turn to find her coming to their room, holding a mug on her left hand and absently rubbing her fingers against her stomach with her right hand. She was wearing just her leggings and a long sleeved maroon tunic that reached to her knees. Her hair was loose and brushed over her left shoulder.

"What do you have there?" As much as he meant to refer his question to the mug in her hand, his eyes focused on the hand that rubbed on her stomach.

"This?" She asked, lifting the mug to him and then shrugging while walking to the bed and sitting on her side. "Water." After taking a sip from the mug, she placed it down on the night table by her side of the bed and then brought that same hand up to her eyes, rubbing them gently.

Hiccup watched her. Walking to the other side of the bed and climbing on it. "Does...your stomach hurt?"

It felt a lot more difficult for him to speak the words that wandered in his head. He had never seen Astrid complain about any part of her body that might molest her. Her pride usually took her that far. Yet, he thought she might not know how he'd been noticing her rubbing constantly on her stomach. Which only made him feel a little concerned. Even when she shook her head to answer his question, Hiccup couldn't bring himself to believe her.

"Indigestion. I probably ate too many apples." She said.

Hiccup blinked in recognition at her, "You only ate two." Recalling how she had told him that before he came in with Toothless to Elipso, she had eaten the only green apple left in the tree. Plus, the one apple she ate with him.

"Well, then it might be the brown trout I had for breakfast." She said.

Still unconvinced, Hiccup climbed on the bed and laid on his side.

The awkward silence between them was enough for her to chuckle aloud and look down at him. She found him resting on his left lateral decubitus. Giving his back to her. "What were you thinking?" She asked, crawling on the bed and kneeling right behind him.

"Me?" He asked. "Nothing."

Leaning down and closer to him, Astrid rested her chin on his shoulder and planted a soft kiss on it. Smirking up at him while admiring his closed-eyes-expression. "Hiccup...?"

"Hm?" He hummed. Giving away the impression he might be on the verge to fall asleep.

She pouted, looked down at his arm once again, then back up at him, and back at his arm. Smirking like a devious cat, she opened her mouth and dug her teeth into his arm. Having him flinch and move to lay on his back.

"Ow, Astrid! What was that for?!" He whined. Rubbing his hand on the spot she had just nearly devoured.

"I'm not tired yet." She simply responded.

"And hungry?"

"Pretty much." She teased.

"Didn't you just say you had indigestion?"

Astrid shrugged, leaned down to him and cupped his face in her palm. She closed her eyes and brushed her lips against his own. "Answering his question already, and all the others that were meant to come out from his lips. She didn't want any food. She wanted him, and he wasn't going to stop her.

He moved his hand from the spot she had just bitten on and slid it to the back of her neck. Keeping her from pulling away as he parted her lips and slid his tongue in. Savoring her.

His other hand moved down the hem of her tunic, lifting it over her chest and letting her break their kiss long enough for her to move away, let him roll the piece higher to her shoulders, over her head, and then pull her back down to him.

Her fingers danced over the skin of his chest and down to his navel.

His immediate reaction to shake his head and grab her hand from his trousers surprised her. But when she felt him pull her down on him once again with that same hand, she allowed herself to smile against his lips while feeling his arms wrap around her body and squeeze her in a tight embrace.

Their legs entangled and as they gave into the desires that have been stored for days in their hearts, their bodies rolled over and over again all around the bed as if they were two lions playing to know who the best wrestler was.

Next time they rolled on the bed, Astrid was over him. Conquering his mouth until she accidentally bit on his lower lip and small bits of blood were caught by her tongue. He didn't groan at it, he just pushed his lips further against hers as if asking her to take in his blood as much as his body.

There was no room for shame or pain when lust stepped in. Tonight, their bodies hollered for what their hearts felt.

Astrid's lips parted from his for a quick second as she brushed them down to his jawline and her hand traveled down his rising and falling chest, finding the knot on his pants. Undoing it with a quick pull before sliding it down to meet his throbbing spot.

Hiccup's lips found her mouth once again, only to release his groan in a kiss as he moved both hands up her back and reached for the golden ends of her loose hair. Rolling his finger on one of her locks, he then slid his hand back down and across the skin of her sides, searching for the two forbidden fruits on her chest.

Their bodies rolled once again. Now laying over her, he pulled away to gaze down at her lowest half and then looked back up at her. Leaning down once again, this time pressing his lips against her throat. Panting against her burning skin and hearing the loud heartbeats competing with her soft moans as his lips traced down her chest, down the line to her stomach and lower to her navel. Dropping baby kisses over her cold belly while both of his hands worked to pull her leggings down her thighs and legs. His hands went back up her knees and parted her thighs to make way for his lips to plant some more kisses over the golden locks that adorned the gateway to his body.

Her lips parted and released a soft call to him, making him move his head up to glance at her and soon slide himself back up to her. Meeting her lips and taking them in while positioning himself between her.



The slow feeling of his member breaking through and claiming her insides made her gasp and swallow a strong amount of fluid down her throat.

When her muscles finally relaxed around him, she pushed herself upwards and rolled them over once again. Laying over his already heated body and beginning to rise and drop her hips over his.

His hands slid down her front and met the joining of their bodies. Focusing his eyes on how her body rose and fell over his. She took a hold of both of his hands and in a quick movement, she pinned his arms over his head and held both of his wrists in one hand while the other supported herself on him.

Hiccup looked back up at her, trying to push aside the look of pleasure that flooded all over his face for at least one second and narrowed his brows at her, "T-tha-that's...ah...ch-cheating, ah-ha,"

The intents to speak without letting a moan escape his lips was in vain. But she loved that look on his face even if the amount of times she'd see it was limited. Her hips slowed down, his eyes shot a blank stare at her that only made her slightly laugh between soft sighs.

After teasing him for a few more seconds, Astrid released his hands and leaned back down to him, pushing her lips against his. Claiming him. Devouring him. Over and over again.

They had underestimated the power of lust. They never imagined how dangerous it might be for them to keep the distance, especially after giving their bodies to one another. She didn't want to part away from him. She became selfish at the moment...and so did he. Refusing to tear their bodies from each other, thinking of no other thing than pleasuring one another even after their impossibly powerful climax came in.

The back of her fingers traced up his neck, across his cheekbones, up to his forehead and brushed his long bangs away before digging her fingers in his hair. Slightly tugging from it as she felt his hand explore down her back and grope on her gluteus.

As time stopped in their world, both Vikings finally drowned back into the seas of desire, lust and love. Letting each and every moan and groan be saved in their memories and hearts. Marking their name on their bodies as they moved. Even after her body rested motionless over his, all bare and pure, serving as the storage of every magical seed he'd plant in, his hands still moved up and down her back. As if adventuring her once wasn't enough for him to discover every secret of her body.

Buried her face in his neck, taking in the clean scent of his skin, her lips nibbled on him as her hand traveled all over his falling and rising chest. Weak fingers tangled in the strangeness of the small amount of dark locks that emerged from the center of his chest. Her eyes were closed. Soon after, she felt his hand abandon her buttocks for the amount of seconds enough to feel the sheets drape over their bare bodies. His hand rested on her lower back, over the sheets.

Hiccup slowly began to move her from his body, and she groaned and pushed her hips carefully tighter against his own as a result. Refusing to have him slip out of her. She heard him chuckle, but she didn't care. She wanted to have him inside for as long as humanly possible. She wanted to be part of his body for a while longer. Shortly after, both of them fell into a pleasant sleep.

\* \* \*

><p>The skies were dark, only adorned with the most beautiful stars in the entire cosmos. The wind was cold, but gentle. However, when nature least expected it, dark clouds hid those beautiful sparkling dots that adorned the night sky and soon, it began to pour rain. The skies screamed thunder and lightning illuminated the dark and deserted streets of a peacefully sleeping Berk.<p>

One, two, or maybe three hours passed after the two lovers fell asleep rolled up in each others' arms. Astrid, had her head using Hiccup's chest as a pillow. Her ear rested exactly above his heart. Allowing his heartbeat be her favorite lullaby.

Hiccup's arm was draped around her. Holding her close. It seemed like even while deeply asleep, his arm would every once in a while hold and loosen it's hold on her.

They were lost in the wonderful Realm of Dreams that not even the loudest thunder crash woke them up. They were exhausted. In every sense of the word.

Yet, Astrid's eyes shot open when an unexpected twinge on the lowest of her stomach took away the air she needed to stay calm. Slowly, her body moved from Hiccup's and laid on her back beside him. Staring up at the ceiling, trying her best to breathe slow and low, her insides twisted once again. Pressing her right palm against her lower abdomen as if that would make the pain go away. Her eyes squeezed shut and her lips began to bleed thanks to the way she bit on them in order not to wake Hiccup up.

No, I can't wake him...she thought.

Closing her legs tight, a cold and moist sensation between her legs caught her attention. Her knees moved to the side and soon she managed to force herself to sit on the edge of the bed.

The pain vanished. Giving her just enough time to scurry on her tiptoes to the bathroom and close the door behind her. Moving to the small table by the door, where there lied a small C-shaped fire-steel with curled ends, small pieces of char-cloth, and a candlestick, she grabbed the fire-steel first and stood in front of the candlestick as she took a hold of the char-cloth with her other hand. As she was about to make friction to start a fire and light the candle, her knees lost their strength without warning her and bent on the hardwood as the muscles of her lower abdomen contracted once again.

The fire-steel and char-cloth fell from her hands and her back leaned against the wall. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her knuckles against her abs once again.

"W-what...is... wrong with...me..." She muttered in silence. Her

jaw clenched and her insides soon began to burn. A lightning bolt illuminated the skies above their house and therefore was a brief second of light in the washroom coming through the open window. One brief second. Enough for Astrid's eyes to catch a glimpse of what the darkness hid from her.

Scarlet stains all over her inner thighs.

"Astrid?" A distant voice called. Her husband that now sat on the bed gazing sleepily at the washroom's closed door waited for an answer.

To Be Continued...

## 16. Spoken Fears

Not strange at all was for him to turn on his side and feel a bigger space in the bed. It was something Hiccup learned to get well used to ever since he became a husband and a chief at the same time. To them, it was all normal now!

Though they did wish things could be a lot different, but it was who they were now and no one could change that.

He had heard a door close, but it could be just part of his dream.

Later around midnightâ€"or maybe sometime a little further, Hiccup turned to lay on his belly and stretched his left arm to the far side. Slowly moving it upwards against the bed, then downwards. To the right and again to the left. Feeling absolutely nothing. Again, he repeated those movements a lot faster nowâ€"hoping to hit something it seemsâ€"but all he got, was a good roll of the sheets around his arm.

It was definitely not the first time he did such a thing and found himself all alone in bed. Every morning, even if he knew Astrid would leave earlier, he searched for her. Countless times calling her name in his head.

No. Wait a second. She doesn't have to train today...â€"He thoughtâ€"\_as long as the others are visiting Larlis and Icso, she doesn't have to leave so early. \_

His brows narrowed, still keeping his eyes closed as his hand continued moving against the empty sheets by his side. Hiccup released a soft-lazy growl before taking in a deep breath and letting it go through his nostrils when a loud thunder crashed above their house and made his exposed-eye snap open.

The sound of metal hitting against the hardwood made his neck twist to the direction in which the sound emanated. His body rose, turning and sitting on the center of the bed, rubbing his heavy knuckles against his eyes and releasing a big and silent yawn.

Turning his head to the room's door, he noticed that it was still closed and that on the chair by the window, Astrid's clothes were neatly folded.

\_She's still here\_â€”He thought.

His gaze moved around the room. Listening to the loud rain that took over everything outdoors. Wondering if she went downstairs for a drink or a midnight snack. But as he lifted his bum a little to glance at the floor and saw the long sleeved maroon tunic and leggings he removed from her just a few hours ago, his thoughts took a whole different turn. Guiding themselves through a path of utter confusion.

\_No, she can't possibly have left the room without any clothes on\_â€”he thoughtâ€”\_Or perhaps she is wearing my clothes?\_â€”he added, glancing at the floor once more and locating his tunic well forgotten on the other side of the room and his trousers on the verge of falling from the bed.

Then, \_the\_ lightning bolt that illuminated their sky and on a brief second pierced through the small gap between the curtains and the window, made Hiccup's gaze move at the closed door of their washroom and called, "Astrid?"

Long seconds passed, yet there was no answer. She probably couldn't hear him thanks to all the noise outside. She probably wasn't in the washroom anyway.

\_I'd better go find her...\_â€”He thought.

Pushing the sheets aside, swinging his legs out of the bed, the sound of her distant voice behind the closed door of their washroom stopped him from getting out of the bed.

"Coming," she said.

Hiccup stayed seated. Yawning every now and then while battling with the heavy eyelids that repeatedly draped over his eyes.

The bathroom's door opened and his eyes shot back open. Searching for her. It was too dark to see her figure walking back to bed and the storm wouldn't let him trust his hearing to know if she was walking or not.

It wasn't until after he felt the bed finally being claimed by someone else, that he knew she was a lot closer than he thought. A hand found his rising and falling chest and slowly pushed him back down to lay on his back as her body also moved down with his.

His hand found hers on his chest and held it gently, bringing it up to his lips and kissing her palm once while his other hand moved the sheets over their bare bodies.

Astrid laid on her side, letting him hold her hand and feeling how his thumb slowly moved back and forth against the back of it.

Hiccup then turned on his side to face her. "Is there something wrong?" He asked. Feeling as if her unusual silence had a strong reason behind it.

Even though she couldn't look at his expression, she knew his tone revealed a large dose of concern. While she gripped on the hem of the sheets and brought them over her breasts, she pulled her hand from

his hold and made her fingers walk over his arm, shoulder, down his chest and then started to draw small figures on it. "No." She responded. "I just felt a little \_strange\_ and went to the bathroom."

"Strange?" He whispered.

Astrid nodded, "Yes. Like, all of the sudden this disturbing feeling in my lower abdomen and then I felt a little lightheaded."

"Mm..."

"What?"

"No, nothing." He mumbled, "I was just thinking."

"About?" Something in his voice told her that he was on the verge of falling asleep at any second. She could even feel his hand rest on her hip and his touch getting a lot lighter by the second.

"Just out of curiosity," he began, "Have you been eating well lately?"

She snickered withinâ€”mockingly, "Doctor Hiccup in the house now, isn't he?"

Hiccup released a soft and quick laugh, then shook his head. "Not exactly, but I was remembering how you said earlier that you had indigestion. We've been stuffing our dinner in for a few days, don't you think \_that\_ could be a reason to it?"

Astrid thought about it for a minute, then shook her head, "Doubt it."

"Why so?"

"Because if it were \_that\_, then I would have already paid the price."

She was right though. If the problem was the way they had to force themselves to eat lately, then she would have already barfed out all of her organs for dear life. But that wasn't the case. The twinge she felt was \_strong\_. So much, it even cut the air away from her for a few seconds and made her lose her balance. She didn't know if telling him such details was the right thing to do. She thought that everything else was simply, \_unnecessary\_. Especially the blood part.

Blood can mean \_many\_ things, right? It may even mean that while they gave into each others desires a few hours ago, they might have gotten a little overboard and hurt her insides. After all, the blood between her legs was light enough for her to wipe it off with a damp cloth while she still managed to gain her strengths back.

\_No... I can't just hide this from him. It isn't like me to stay silent about something like this when it comes to talking with him\_,â€”she thoughtâ€”\_He will probably think of something ridiculously dramatic, but we have always been there for each other. I have to tell him. Yes, I will tell him. Okay, here goes

nothing...\_

"Uh, Hiccup?" She began, "About that twinge..."

Deep snores cut her words off. The fingers resting on her hip absently twitched. When her eyes darted up, she imagined his eyelids already closed and his lips parted.

\_Ah, he fell asleep\_.â€"she thought\_â€"Hehe, Hiccup looks adorable when he is soundly asleep.â€"\_she grinned\_â€" Even if I can't actually see him because of the darkness, in my imagination, he looks like he sure is enjoying his dream. \_

Astrid moved forward to peck on his lips and then laid her face close to his chest.

\_Guess I could always just mention what happened sometime tomorrow\_.â€"she thought.

Hiccup moved. Laying on his back, unconsciously sliding his arm under her and pulling her to him. Now, Astrid was once again using his chest as a pillow.

The sounds of his distant heartbeat eventually sent her back into a deep slumber.

Thank Frigga, the twinge didn't return that night. Or any other night after that one.

For now...

\* \* \*

><p>"Hiccup!"<p>

Hiccup's head turned from the seas to catch the image of his wife running down the wooden ramps, holding a basket in one hand. As her feet made it to the sand, she stopped herself for just a brief second to look down at her feet and then started speed-walking toward him. "Here, have this. Phlegma gave it to me on the way."

Looking down at the basket in her hands, his eyes focused on the white cloth that covered its contents. "What is it?" He asked. Lifting an edge of the cloth to peek in.

"Corn biscuits." Astrid responded. Taking a grip on the cloth and removing half of it to expose three freshly baked corn biscuits. Her hand reached for one of them and offered it to him. "You shouldn't continue skipping breakfast. You will get ill."

Hiccup flicked his tongue, "Says someone who barely eats and only spends all day training." taking the biscuit from her hand, muttering his gratitude and bringing the piece to his mouth. One quick bite was enough to nod in approval to its taste.

Swallowing the contents in his mouth, Hiccup brushed the sleeve of his arm against his lips and was taken aback when Astrid chuckled while watching him and soon felt her fingers scratching a stubborn crumb off the left edge of his lips.

Fifteen days have passed since Astrid and Hiccup learned that Eret and the gang left to the islands of Iceso and Larlis under Hiccup's command. Time flies when you are truly enjoying yourselves. It almost felt like that to Hiccup and Astrid. It felt as if time was being awfully cruel to them. Though, they were more than grateful of such a rare opportunity.

Yes, while the gang was away, these two dorks behaved like two teenagers in love. Mocking one another in bed while hearing the birds chirping outside their window in the morning. Sharing memories as they relaxed by the fire in their living room at night. Taking walks together while making sure everything in town was in order.

They didn't have enough time to go out for a nice and pleasurable flight together, but they did get to fly together to the wilderness and help with the recollection of wood. Yes, they were working, but as they fulfilled their duties, they also enjoyed themselves.

To Astrid's own peace-of-mind, the disturbing twinge she had experienced the night they learned that Eret and the gang had left didn't return. Though she did mention the blood part to Hiccup and he did panic enough to almost hop on Toothless and search for Gothi as if Astrid was being attacked by giants.

Thankfully, Astrid stopped him from going for Gothi and calmed him down by promising that she would stay closer now that the gang was gone. And she kept her promise. At times, she wondered if keeping herself busy was what kept her from thinking about that horrible moment she experienced just a few nights ago.

His lips then moved as if he was meaning to say something when an awfully loud and familiar voice stiffened both Viking's shoulders, "Astrid Hofferson!"

"Great..." Hiccup muttered his sarcasm as he frowned unintentionally at her. Astrid just gave him a sheepish smile in response and then turned to face the big figure that stormed down the wooden ramps and directly towards them.

"Uh-G-Good morning, mother." She didn't mean to sound as uncomfortable as she suddenly felt. She wanted to try her best and straighten her posture once again to shoot a confident glance at her mother. "What brings you here?"

Bertha's eyes narrowed at Hiccup once she got closer to them. Directing her words to Astrid, but always staring sharply at her son-in-law. "What brings me here, are the voices all over the village that confirm yer presence by the chief's side in the docks."

"Um, isn't that what I've always done?" Astrid asked. Raising a brow at her, trying to get her mother to look at her. "Mother, it's not the first time I accompany Hiccup to the docks. Shouldn't be surprising you."

"After what happened last time, do ya think I shouldn't be surprised?" Bertha spat. Still staring down at Hiccup "who only tried to avert his eyes from her scary glare. "Yeh are coming with me, Astrid. Once those ships arrive, yeh will stay indoors until I say so."

"What!?" Astrid slowly backed from her mother. "Why!?"

"Last time this irresponsible and troublesome boy allowed you to welcome foreign ships with him, you were forced to leave Berk." Bertha responded. Making Astrid narrow her eyes up at her mother now.

"Yeah, you just said it. Last time. But as you can see, I am still here and that boy you so carelessly speak of, is your chief and my husband. No less..." Her voice suddenly sounding a little louder, gathering the attention of most Berkians surrounding them. "And just in case you've forgotten, I decided to accompany him last time. I alone, and I will keep deciding to join him on whatever it is he gets involved in. Would it kill you to show at least a fraction of respect?"

Bertha's eyes finally darted down at the girl.

Astrid could swear, that if the eyes of her mother could ever shoot fire, she would already been a roasted sheep. "You, dare sass me, Astrid?" Bertha hissed.

"No. I'm not sassing you, mother." Astrid said. "I am just telling the truth."

Bertha's body stiffened. Her throat gave way to a good amount of saliva as her brows curled down at Astrid and her jaw clenched. She looked like she was going to draw her heavy hand back and press her palm against Astrid's cheek at any moment for letting her mouth run off in public.

For a quick second, the girl felt as if she had turned five once again. The look on her mother's eyes wasn't at all that pleasant. In fact, it was quite terrifying even for Astrid. As much as she wanted to hide the terror starting to run through her veins at the kind of thoughts that grew in her mind by just looking into her mother's dangerous gaze, Astrid's throat felt on fire. Making it difficult for her to swallow. Or even keep her fingers still on her sides as their constant trembling made the basket in her hand start to slowly slip from her hand. She forgot where her place was. She forgot that before being the Lady-Chief, before being a warrior and a dragon rider, before being Hiccup's wife, she was Big-Boobied Bertha's only daughter. It was something she couldn't just ignore. Before anything else in life, she had to respect her motherâ€"even if she disagreed with her ways.

As Astrid's eyes fell to the wooden bridge beneath her frozen feet, her free arm was gripped and soon yanked from Hiccup's side.

Next thing she realized, was that she was being dragged by her mother's painful grasp.

"Bertha." Strong, yet gentle was the female voice that stopped Bertha from moving any further.

When Astrid finally recovered enough courage to lift her gaze, she saw Valka standing in their way.

They were already at the beach. Quite far from the dock she was standing with Hiccup just a second ago.



"Do you truly think this is a behavior suitable for a lady of your position in society?" It only surprised Astrid to hear Valka talking as calm as ever.

\_How can she be so calm when I can't!?"\_â€"Astrid thought.

"Hiccup, is Astrid's husband now." Valka continued, "Astrid is an adult, a woman that has become the governor of her own decisions. It isn't your place to decide on what she will and will not do." The woman paused, letting quick seconds pass by as she glanced over Bertha's shoulder and then back down at Astrid. Then, her eyes moved back up at the hefty woman, "...Not anymore."

"Be wise and do not interfere, Valka." Bertha hissed.

"I \_will\_ interfere." Valka said, "You are causing a commotion without any valid reason."

"Does it look like I care?" Bertha growled, her grip on Astrid's arm getting tighter, and tighter, and tighterâ€"\_until all the blood in her arm stopped from coming and going.

The basket in Astrid's hand fell to the sand as a reaction to the numbness that started to grow on her other arm.

"No, it doesn't." Valka said, "Which only makes me believe that the reasons behind your actions towards Astrid go \_beyond\_ our understanding." Her brows slightly curled as her head tilted to the right, "You know, you could be \_very\_ confusing at times, Bertha."

"In what way?" Bertha breathed.

"Well, rumor has it that sometimes you show far too much care over Astrid's safety and future while on other times, you are as mean and rusty with her as you have always been with the world." Valka takes one step forward, "Exactly, what \_are\_ your true intentions with Astrid and my son?"

Between lowâ€"mockingâ€"snickers, Bertha said, "So, ya continue being bold enough to call yer'self a mother?"

Her words made Valka's eyes blink in realization. Yet Bertha didn't let her defend herself this time as she leaned forward, her face inches from Valka's, "I am growing tired of playing nice and ask yeh to step away from me and my daughter's matters. Watch and \_learn\_ from a \_real\_ mother," her back straightened, "Now, get out of my way!" then pushed the woman out of the way and continued speed-walking. Dragging her daughter with her.

"Wait!" Hiccup shouted. The sound of his voice seemed to have functioned as a hammer against Astrid's head as she shook herself back into her senses and dug her heels into the sand, pulling her body back and forcing her mother to stop. Trying to pull her arm from the grasp that already made it almost impossible for her to feel it.

"I said," Bertha began as she turned on her heel to face the boy that quickly approached them, "I am taking my daughter to safe grounds. Or

do you prefer seeing her be the eye-candy of other men?"

Hiccup panted once he reached them. "That's...impossible." He assured, knowing that now that Astrid was his official wife, there was no one that could ever deprive her from her rights as his partner. "â€"and, if her safety is all that truly concerns you, then I think I may have an idea."

Bertha watched how the Haddock boy moved his hands to reach for her grasp on Astrid's arm and hope for the woman to release her daughter. Hesitating, Bertha's fingers lifted from Astrid's limb.

Astrid's entire arm had turned bright red, except for where Bertha was gripping, which was completely colorless. It didn't surprise Hiccup how Astrid didn't release a single whine. It was expected. At times, he even wondered if she was immune to the pain.

Hiccup took her arm in his hands and gently rubbed on the marks Bertha's fingers left on Astrid's pale skin. Hoping her blood would soon flow normally. His feet slowly stepped backwards. Moving her with him. Her eyes were still buried in the sand beneath them, until a pair of thick and calloused fingers touched her chin and lifted her face to his.

Hiccup understood Astrid's sudden shock. It was a natural response from her body and brain after seeing her own mother's behavior. He couldn't blame her for it. He just wanted to get her out of that tiny and lonely place her thoughts might have left her at. "Hey..." He whispered, once he made sure they were both far enough from Bertha and his mother. "Don't listen to her...she may be scary and all that, but no one is laying a finger on you."

Astrid's eyes blinked up at him. Hiccup was effectively reaching her softer side. The one only he knew how to release from her well-shielded heart. Yet his words startled her in a way that only made the fire in her ignite as she narrowed her eyes at him, bit on her lower lip, drew back the same arm that was just a few seconds ago in her mother's grasp, and punched on his gut. "Are you insinuating that I would be stupid enough to let something like that happen?" Huffs, "Who do you think I am?"

Hiccup's tongue flicked. Trying to recover his posture as he slightly coughed and rubbed on the affected area. "Ah, there you are!" He teased. "I would never mean it that way. But hey, it did make you react, didn't it?"

Astrid's lips parted to make way for the kind of bright smile he was hoping to see, followed by a nod, "Yes, it worked."

"Good." He said, taking his cloak off. He swung it over her head and fixed her bangs on her forehead as he covered her head and body with it. Stepping closer to her, tracing his fingers up her cheeks and across her lips. "Tell you what, wear this until we all know what comes out of those ships isn't a threat. Just...to calm your mom down." He whispered, leaning his face closer to hers.

Soon, she realized both of her palms rested on his sides and her lips were just inches from touching his own. Nodding her way to his lips, they brushed against one another for a few seconds before locking together, making way for her tongue to slip into his mouth.

Forgetting all possible eyes grounded on them and several dropped jaws.

She was the one who broke their kiss and pulled from his hold. Blinking back to reality as she felt all the blood of her body flush straight to her face.

But she wasn't the only one. Hiccup's ears were violently red now that they both realized that half the village was watching them. This only made him gag in silence, quickly bring her hands to his lips, shyly kiss on the back of her hands and then run back to the first dock. Almost clumsily tripping on-only-Odin-knows-what.

She stayed where he left her. Grateful of his usual kindness. For if it wasn't for him, Astrid might have taken a lot more time to snap out of the sudden shock only her mother knows how to put her in. She didn't even dare turn around and face Bertha. She just watched Hiccup return to Gobber's side and soon begin to help with the first ship that got closer.

Valka's hand rested on Astrid's shoulder. Gently grasping on it as they both silently watched the waters. "I feel stupid." Astrid said. Knowing it wasn't at all normal to be wearing a cloak over her head.

Valka released a quick giggle, "Looks sweet." She assured.

Astrid lifted her head up at the woman and rose a brow, "\_Sweet\_"

Valka nodded. Sighing nostalgically. "Stoick used to embarrass me like that at times, as well. Now I understand where Hiccup may have gotten some of his sugar-filled actions towards you."

"Does it seem \_too\_ obvious?" Astrid asked. Suddenly feeling taken aback by the current thought that her approaches with Hiccup weren't as private and as discrete as they both thought they were.

Valka shook her head. "Only on special occasions...like \_now\_."

"Ah..." Astrid breathedâ€" "\_In that case, then fine by me...I guess\_-she thought\_â€" "little affections now and then don't hurt anyway\_."

"Hiccup, boy!" The calls that belonged to the voice of a strange man that climbed down the ship's ramp and spread his arms out to Hiccup, made both ladies turn to see how the man pressed both palms on Hiccup's shoulders and shook the boy back and forth. "Oh, I am so sorry for your loss. Boy, am I glad that you sent these kind people to Icso. If it weren't for them, I would have never known Berk was going through a tough time."

As the hefty, short man-of nearly Hiccup's height-with dark brown hair and a few white highlights on his broad beard talked, more men climbed down from the same ship, carrying barrels of supplies and sealed wooden boxes. "I was also told that the young lady Astrid was nearly forced to abandon the island." The man finished.

"Oi, would yeh let the boy breathe, ei Matlus?" Another man who

climbed down the ramps from the same ship said. He was holding a red chicken in his hand before handing it over to the man who followed him. This one was a little less buff than the one whose name apparently was Matlus. His hair was black and his beard was braided to the center of his chest. The man was a lot taller than Gobber. Almost as tall as Stoick might have been.

Both men, were wearing dark trousers, maroon tunics, their silver belt's buckle formed the symbol of their respective clans, and a black-bear-skin cloak hung down their backs. Their cloak was long enough to almost brush against the ground.

Matlus' buckle, was big enough to fill Hiccup's entire hand. Its shape was of an angry bear's open mouth, showing its canines. What seemed like a thread of flames surrounded the bear's head.

The other man's buckle was as big as Matlus' and its shape was of what seemed like two crossed swords over Thor's hammer.

By the time both men stood in front of Hiccup, Valka had rested her hand on Astrid's back and cautiously walked with her just a little closer to where Hiccup was. Hoping to hear at least a fraction of what they were talking of. It wasn't so hard for them, though. The men were talking loud enough for most of the Berkians surrounding the docks to hear.

Matlus snorted at the man beside him and fixed his pants on his waist, "Eish, Souzbog, Let me be! I've been waiting for this moment for days. Yeh won't be the first to ruin it."

Before Souzbog would even answer him, Matlus turned back to face Hiccup and glanced over the boy's head. Moving his eyes all around the place on a quick second. "Say, speaking of said fair lady, where is she?"

Knowing exactly who Matlus was talking of, Hiccup hesitated to answer. He wasn't sure if confirming his place with Astrid would bring joy to the visitors, or disappointment. He did know that sooner or later, he would have to let Astrid come out of the shadows he had put her in. But right now, he didn't seem to believe that this was the right moment for it. Soon, he noticed Matlus' head had turned to his right. His eyes to the far grounds where Hiccup had left Astrid a while ago. Then, glanced back at him.

Hiccup took in a deep breath and exhaled the words "She is safe."

"Ah good then. I wish to see her soon, if possible." Matlus lowered his head to keep the words between the three chiefs. "Last time I saw her, she was this tiny." His hands cupped together. Emitting low giggles, "Old Vincent used ta visit me pretty often on Icso. Hehe, he used ta bring little Astrid with him."

"I honestly doubt any normal human can be that small." Snotlout laughed the words out as he climbed down from the ship. Fixing on his vest and patting on Hiccup's back hard enough to make the boy stumble. "Thanks for the vacations, cousin-chief."

"They were not vacations." Hiccup muttered back at him.

Snotlout shrugged it off as he walked down the wooden stairs to the beach. "Felt like a vacation \_to me\_."

"He says that because he spent the entire trip doing absolutely \_nothing\_." Tuffnut said. Walking down the wood ramp from the shipâ€"empty handed.

Ruffnut followed, "Yeah, except for drinking mead and hitting on every broom with skirts he spotted."

Tuffnut turned to look all shocked at his sister. "Do brooms wear skirts?!"

"What she means," Fishlegs spoke, carrying a barrel as he walked to them, "Is that he's been after girls ever since we touched land."

"Oooouh! I get it now." Tuffnut yawned. Then frowned at them all, "Hey, then, \_why\_ are we talking about brooms and skirts? You people are stupid."

"Look who's talking..." Fishlegs muttered before pushing the barrel against Tuffnut's chest for him to hold. "Anyway, it wasn't just a trip. We were careful enough not to scare the people from our dragons."

Tuffnut huffed at the Ingerman boy and stomped away from them. Back to the beach, followed by his sister.

"Say, now that you mention them, where are your dragons?" Hiccup asked. Directing the question to Fishlegs who stood on his right side and pointed at the far skies where Skullcrusher, Hookfang, Meatlug, and Barf and Belch flew towards the island. "You sent them back on their own?" Hiccup asked.

"They traveled on one of the ships first." Fishlegs explained. His tone was low; rather curious and joyous. "But then they seemed to get sea sick and we asked them to fly home. They would have gotten here days before us. But they just wouldn't stay away. It was like, they \_escorted\_ us home."

"Chief." Eret called as he climbed down from the ship-empty handed. "I apologize, I know I promised to send reports on our status. But as soon as we got to the Island of Icso and explained everything to the chief, he asked us to surprise you with his presence."

"Yeah," Fishlegs confirmed, "The same happened when we went to the Island of Larlis."

"That's right." Matlus said. Throwing his arm over Souzbog's shoulder and shaking him affectionately. "We were both surprised to hear what has been happening here in Berk after you became the successor of your fatherâ€" "

"â€"and we wanted to personally tell you that we \_never\_ sent any request to visit the island with alliance purposes." Souzbog finished for the other chief.

"Yes!" Matlus hurried, "And, we certainly \_did not\_ receive any reply from you nor did we send another telegram rejecting your apparent

invite."

Hiccup's face suddenly went pale. Finding it difficult to spread any words after hearing something he could hardly believe for the moment. How was it even possible that they never sent a request in the first place? He had the evidence back in his studio at the armory. To be more specific, the letters were in the archives Gobber kept well safe in one of the shop's closets. "H-how can that be possible? I have the replies you sent me. \_Signed\_."

"You may have some replies, Hiccup." Matlus said, shaking his head back and forth with a fallen expression, "...But they are \_not\_ from us."

"Truth is," Souzbog began, "There is no need for a treaty between our tribes. Our ancestors have already done that for us. Thanks to them, our tribes have always lived in peace with one another." He rose his hand to scratch his beard. Thinking. "Thought Vincent frequently visiting Icso and Stoick now and then visiting Larlis was enough proof of that entente..."

"Wait," Hiccup gasped, "My father, you say? He-\_he\_ visited you often?"

Matlust snorted, amused by Hiccup's dumbfounded expression, "Ei, why do you think chiefs often go on diplomatic voyages? To get dunk?!" He laughed.

"Well..." Hiccup mumbled to himself. Actually, \_that\_ was what he always thought of those diplomatic voyages his dad now and then made. He always believed chiefs only gathered to get drunk and talk nonsense all night long. Apparently, he was wrongâ€"\_thankfully\_."

Before Hiccup could even bring himself to say more or ask from \_whom\_ he received those telegrams that only left the Hollibusians to visit the island on their own, Fishlegs hurried his statement in, "That's not what matters now."

Fishleg's voice sounded nervous all of the sudden. His eyes began to move side to side and his body trembled. "Hiccup, you wouldn't guess what our dragons saw three miles from Loki's Isle."

Hiccup waited for the answer. But Fishlegs seemed to have suddenly frozen since he just stared down at his friend. "\_Well\_?" Hiccup pushed. Making Fishlegs shake his senses back to their place, but then he started to glance over his shoulders at the far seas.

Eret sighed exasperated. "Ugh, for the love ofâ€"we saw an \_armada\_ headed straight to Berk."

"What?!" Hiccup blurted. "How's that even possible? The waters are beginning to solidify!"

"Well, technically, they won't get solid until after one more month." Fishlegs informed.

"Which, gives them \_enough\_ time to arrive, attack, and leave." Souzbog said.

"But, we are not ready. \_Yet\_." Hiccup said. Shaking his head in denial.

"Rubbish!" Matlus expressed. Releasing a loud "odd and lunatic" laughter that only made everyone around them quite uncomfortable. "Look around you, Hiccup. You have an entire island full of strong Vikings and Dragons. Plus, go ahead and glance at the seas..."

When Hiccup's head slowly turned to do as Matlus asked, his eyes widened at the image of an entire armada lined up at the distant horizon. "There are two powerful tribes that joined forces on your side." Matlus finished.

Hiccup's eyes skipped back at the two chiefs, "You are both willing to help?"

Fishlegs chuckled, poking his finger on Hiccup's shoulder, "What kind of question is that, Hiccup? Don't you see all the ships lined up back there?" He whispered, "This could give us great chances to win a fight without receiving too much damage."

It wasn't an easy task for Hiccup to swallow all of this on one bite. He could barely make himself believe this wasn't just another dream of his, where everything sounded and looked easy enough to make him feel like things will truly be alright.

At moments like these, the only thing he wanted, was to hop on Toothless' back and disappear for a few hours. Just to give his mind enough time and air to take in all that was happening at his surroundings. It's been fifteen days since Eret set sail to the Islands of Iceso and Larlis.

Fifteen days of desperate waiting for a messenger that would tell him Eret's status in the islands. Fifteen days spent building stronger forts all around the island. Not to forget, fifteen days loving the girl of his dreams. Ah, yes. Fifteen stressful, yet \_wonderful\_ days when it came to come home with Astrid by his side and wake up with her still in his arms "or the other way around.

During those fifteen days, Astrid didn't have \_any\_ reasons to wake up before sunup and simply disappear until the next day. No, during those fifteen days, Hiccup has had the most joyful mornings of his life. Waking up to the image of a Valkyrie lying flat on her stomach by his side. The sheets exposing half of her bare back until he would turn to drape an arm over her and rest his chin on the back of her shoulder and press his lips on the sweaty paleness of her skin.

Fifteen days spent working on the construction of forts all day long, but returning home accompanied by not just Toothless, but also by \_her\_.

Now the gang was back and Berk was probably going to be attacked in no less than a month. If only, Stoick was there to guide Hiccup's thoughts and decisions through correct paths...

Meanwhile, Snotlout scratched his right buttock when he passed by Valka and someone in a cape. Forcing his feet to a halt and turning to face the stranger. Pointing at its face. "Hey, who is this

goofball in the stupid cape? Looks like myâ€œ\_Ow\_!"

The fist that was suddenly buried in his gut made him spit out his cries to the sand before his eyes moved from the ground to meet with two sharp-blue ones. "Ugh, uh heyâ€œ"ha-happy to see you too, Astridâ€œ" he gagged.

Astrid didn't say a word. She just kept her frown at him, fixed her shoulders straight, turned on her heel and began walking towards the spiral-shaped wooden ramps that led them back to town.

Few seconds later, Snotlout glanced aroundâ€œmaking sure no one was lookingâ€œpulled himself back together and ran after the two women.

\* \* \*

><p>"Alright guys, it is time to show Hiccup what you've been working on for the past few weeks." from the center of the arena, Astrid spoke. The gang formed a circle around her and Hiccup. She had the cloak he had given her hanging from her left forearm. "This might be the last training session for a while. So do your best."<p>

"Why the last? Are we going to die?" Tuffnut asked.

"Yes." Snotlout said, "They are going to pull our organs out and feed them to mutating fish."

"Really?!" Tuffnut asked, "Awesome! I want to be mutating fish food."

"Um, no." Hiccup sighed. "We are not going to die and we will not be food for sea animals. But after this, I will need each and every one of you to take shifts on guarding each region of the island. You won't be alone. Take your dragons with you. If you want someone else to join you, then fine by me. Just, call the others if you see any strange movement."

"Got it." Tuffnut and Ruffnut said in unison. Glancing at one another before smirking and banging their helmets together.

"But that's later on." Astrid waved her other hand. As if her movements would make anyone stop themselves from hopping on their dragon's backs and split up around the island. She then rested that same hand on her hip. "Now, who wants to go first?"

"We do!" Ruffnut rose her arm up high and waved it side to side while smiling wide at everyone else. When she glanced at her brother, she notice him spacing out as he dug his forefinger into his nose. She then used her other hand to grab his and wave it up in the air like hers.

Tuffnut looked up at their arms and then gasped "Oh, right! Pick us!"

Astrid nodded and offered the cloak back to Hiccup. "Good. Start when you're ready." After Hiccup took the cloak from her, she turned her back to him and walked over to Stormfly who was laying by one of the dragon cells they now used as storage.



Standing by her dragon, Astrid moved an arm and rested her hand on Stormfly's wing. Gently rubbing it as she watched the twins send signals at Barf and Belch to go to the other side of the academy when her head suddenly began to feel heavier than any other normal headache.

Her eyelids draped over her eyes and when she opened them again, her vision blurred. Soon, there were dark blue dots appearing out of nowhere all over the place. Those dark blue dots turned to bright green and then to a midnight-black before they disappeared into a white background and her eyes closed once again. Her knees began to shake. Making her take a few steps backwards until her back hit the stoned wall behind her.

Low, concerned grumbles from Stormfly became a faraway sound her ears soon stopped receiving.

A pair of big hands steadied her waist just in time before her legs betrayed her. Her head felt like it was spinning, unable to think of ways to claim her personal space—or to even identify the one that held her from falling to the ground.

For an almost eternal second, the innate ability to open her eyes had disappeared from her brain.

Few moments later, her hearing sense started to slowly return. However, the voices sounded really far way.

"Mmh...Nnhm..." Moans, were all she could force her lips to release as she felt one of the hands that held her slide up from her sides and cup her face in it.

"As...are...aigh...cold..." The words she could hear were incomplete to her. Not even the voice, could she recognize. Then, they came again, "As...are...aigh...cold..." But the second time she heard them, even though she couldn't understand their meaning, they did sound a lot louder than before.

She was already sitting on the ground when her eyes finally opened and the blur started to fade away. Her head moved up to find Hiccup kneeling in front of her, holding her still with one hand and wiping what felt like sweat drops from her forehead with his other hand.

Her lips were sealed. Unable to part and make way for the kind of words she actually wanted to say. She just stared up at him with numb eyelids and leaned her cheek against his palm.

"Astrid, are you alright?! You are as cold as ice." He said.

"Mm..Nnh" She moaned. Again. Trying to force her lips apart and tell him she was alright—"Even if she had to lie about it.

It wasn't the best time to tell him how dizzy and out-of-it she was feeling. They were running against the clock now and the least they all needed was another reason to get worried.

"Did you guys give her any Achlys again?" Fishlegs whispered to Snotlout and the twins. Making sure they were the only ones who heard

him.

"Not that I can remember. Besides, the last bit we had left was already used. I wanted to make Ruff drink it but nothing happened." Tuffnut answered.

"That's because you gave Ruffnut the wrong mug." Fishlegs said. Remembering how on their last feast together, Tuffnut tried to play a prank on Ruffnut but Astrid took the mug with the brew from his hand and gulped it down.

"Oh, right." Tuffnut nodded. Then looked back at his sister, "So, did you give her some now?"

"Nope." She slowly shook her head. The three of them then glanced back at Snotlout, who only stared down at a dizzy Astrid and a panicked Hiccup trying to bring her back to them.

When Snotlout realized all eyes were on him, the man froze stiff and then shook it off, frowning at them. "What?! Do you really think I poisoned her? How could I? We just came in! Geesh..."

As much as Fishlegs would hate to admit it, Snotlout was right. None of them could have given Astrid something that might put her in that state simply because they all just returned from a long and exhausting trip. There was no time for them to think of something to amuse themselves. Which only meant that Fishlegs had to think of other reasons that might have made Astrid faint all of the sudden, when she seemed to be just fine a few moments ago.

"Hiccup, has she been eating well lately?" Fishlegs asked. "I think we should get Gothi."

"Of course she's been eating!" Hiccup responded, still all puzzled up and trying to figure out ways to touch her without making things worse. Crawling closer to her, he brought her into his arms. "We've been stuffing our food in lately because of our tight schedule and she might have skipped breakfast one or two times but I honestly doubt that has anything to do with this." Laying her head on his chest, holding her close while whispering his pleas for her to get it all back together.

A hand gently pushed against his chest and when he looked down at her, Astrid was moving away from his embrace and slowly standing up from the ground. Offering a hand down to him.

Hiccup looked up at her, then took her hand and let her pull him back up on his feet. "Thank you, guys. But I'm fine." She said. Dusting her clothes and then looking up at so many perplexed eyes that stared down at her.

"Uh, I don't think that what we just saw, is a good definition of being fine, Astrid." Hiccup said flatly. Backing away from her and beckoning at Toothless, "I'll go get Gothi."

"No!" Astrid shouted. Sounding a lot more alarmed than she would ever want to. Clearing her throat and sighing aloud, "Guys, I just got a little dizzy. There is no need to get Gothi or feel worried."

"Who said anything about being worried?" Tuffnut spat. Crossing his

arms over his chest and turning his head away. "You are so ungrateful, you are hurting my feelings."

Astrid rose a brow at the male twin, then rolled her eyes and moved her attention back to Hiccup. "Yes, we have been stuffing our food in lately and therefore it hasn't become my best friend these days since I now end up with an annoying indigestion. But that has nothing to do with it. Really, I might be getting just a sudden cold. There is nothing to be concerned of."

Hiccup didn't give her a quick answer. He just stared down at her with an unconvinced expression and suddenly curled up brows. Thinking that it was simply new to see Astrid faint like that all of the sudden and then act as if nothing actually happened. She had been out of it for a whole minute. It surely felt more than that, but if it wasn't for Stormfly growling alarmed at Astrid's sudden swaying, Hiccup wouldn't have made it in time to catch her from a nasty fall to the ground and probably hit her head.

But he also had to take in the thoughts that if she said she felt better now, he just had to believe her. If he later on suspects another strange behavior from her, then he would definitely fly up to Gothi's hut and bring her to their house without letting Astrid say otherwise. "Fine. I believe you, Astrid. Just, try not to scare me like that again, okay?" This time, his tone sounded a lot less worried.

Astrid nodded, "Got it."

Ruffnut crossed her arms over her chest and said, "Seriously, woman. Are the words 'I'm fine' your favorite words, or what?"

Astrid pouted, "I mean them when I say them."

Ruffnut huffed within, feeling skeptical. Then shrugged her shoulders, "Whatever."

"Now, why aren't I seeing someone burn someone else's butt?! Ruff, Tuff. Didn't you say you wanted to go first?" Astrid asked.

"Oh, right." Tuffnut said. Turning back at his sister. "Ready?"

"Ready!" Ruffnut said.

Astrid sighed withinâ€"in reliefâ€"Grateful that everyone else moved their attention away from her.

Stormfly moved her head forward. Having Astrid giggle at her and rub on the dragon's chin as she whispered, "Don't worry, girl. It's all over now." Her head turned to find Toothless standing just a few feet from her. He moved closer and sniffed all over her frontal side.

After the Night Fury sniffed her, his eyes snapped open and then looked back up at her. Tilting his head to the right in wonder before sniffing her again. This time, moving his head around the middle section of her body. Slightly brushing his nose over her stomach and silently purring.

Astrid rose a brow at him and then chuckled as she moved her hand from Stormfly's chin and petted Toothless' head. "Hey, I did take a bath this morning, you know?" She mocked.

Toothless responded by making his purrs sound a little louder. Rubbing his cheek against Astrid's stomach. Astrid slightly laughed at the feeling, "Toothless, that tickles."

Toothless' eyes widened at her. Astrid chuckled when she saw his reaction, "Believe it or not, it does tickle." pouts playfully, "What, did you think I was made out of iron or something?" teases.

The only way Toothless responded to that, was by rubbing his cheek against her once again until Stormfly released a low squawk and Toothless pulled away from the Viking.

Both dragons hesitated to move their attention away from the female Viking, but after hearing Belch's spark at Barf's gas form a direct line towards the twins, both dragons moved away from her.

When Astrid thought everyone was well focused on how the twins tried to defend themselves from their own dragon, the back of Astrid's hand rubbed against her eyes as she wondered how she could feel dizzy and faint all of the sudden without any logical reason behind it.

What she didn't realize, was that Valka had been silently observing her the whole time from afar. From the moment she started swaying, until after she stood on her feet and the dragons showed their concern to her.

Valka's brows were narrowed in curiosity. Her lips curled up. Recalling the first time she felt as dizzy as Astrid showed she was feeling and for once—"since about twenty-one years ago"—she hoped her thoughts and wonders were incorrect.

"Um, guys?" Fishlegs approached the twins, "What are you two doing?"

"What does it look like we are doing?" Tuffnut said.

"Fighting our dragon." Ruffnut finished for her brother.

"Uh, no." Snotlout said, "It looks more like a gassy mess to me." His hand moved to wave back and forth in front of his face, trying to ventilate the excess of Barf's gas that started to spread all around them. When Snotlout's eyes darted up to the dragon, Ruffnut was smirking up at it while Barf still released his greenish gas. Making Snotlout grit on his teeth and yell "Quit it already!"

"We are supposed to show Hiccup how well we can defend ourselves without our dragons." Fishlegs informed, trying to also fan away the gas that approached his nostrils. "—not to intoxicate ourselves with Barf's gas and then be all roasted up with Belch's spark."

"That'd be fun." Tuffnut said, suddenly seeming all excited as he bounced lightly on his heels and then pointed back at his sister, "Put that on the list!"

"Ugh, this is ridiculous." Astrid stepped in. Grabbing a shield and a sword from the table of shields behind Hiccup. "\_I'll\_ break the ice."

"Wait," Hiccup's hand took a quick hold of her arm before she would slide her wrist through the enarmes. Once her head turned to his, Hiccup's swallow had been loud enough for her to understand he wasn't well comfortable with the idea of her fighting at the moment after seeing what happened to her.

Taking advantage of his delay to continue his statement, Astrid pulled her arm back from his hold and frowned back up at him, "Hiccup, don't worry about me. I. Am. Fine."

"Yup." Ruffnut said, "Definitely her favorite words."

The way she spoke the last wordsâ€"all flatly and scaryâ€"made Hiccup release a loud sigh of surrender and simply nodded at her. Backing away from her. Not really in the mood to argue with her since he always knew it was a bad idea to do so. And big waste of energies.

As he watched her turn her back to him and decidedly walk to the center of the arena, he only allowed his whispers be loud enough for her ears and the ones of Toothless and Stormfly to catch, "You can never truly expect me to stop worrying about you..."

Astrid's body froze for a quick second while his words dug deep into her ears and made her silently regret all that her body had mysteriously made her go through in the past few days.

\_See?\_â€"She thoughtâ€"\_Hiccup gets panicked over nothing far too easily. Geesh...how am I still not used to it after so many years of knowing him?\_

Seconds of only silence between them all passed before Astrid pulled herself back together and continued walking. "Who will volunteer to be my first opponent?"

"I will." Eret's voice sounded a lot louder as he walked into the Academy grounds. Crackling his knuckles and pulling out a sword from the barrel at the entrance. Pointing the blade at her, "You, are the only woman I can make an exception on matters of respect and distance."

Snotlout silently moved closer to Hiccup, smirking up at him and as he rested his back against the wall, crossing one leg over the other and began scratching his beard with his forefinger. He mumbled, "...And so the affair continues,"

"Uh, excuse me, Snotlout?" Hiccup asked.

Snotlout shook his head and shrugged carelessly. "Oh, it's nothing. Just, interactions between Eret and Astrid. You know, it's been a while since you last visited the academy."

"So?" Hiccup said.

"\_So?!\_" Snotlout snorted, then slightly laughed. "Do you even

remember last time we talked about Eret and Astrid's mysterious approaches?"

"Here we go again," Hiccup sighed, rolling the words out of his lips as he shook his head. Hoping his cousin would just give up the tries to make him feel uncomfortable when putting Eret into the subject.

"I'm serious, Hiccup." Snotlout spat. "Eret has a crush on Astrid and you are too much of a blind loser to even notice."

"Oh, \_ I noticed \_." Hiccup assured. Watching how Snotlout's brows lifted in surprise and his jaw fell to his neck.

"Wait...\_what\_?" Snotlout mumbled. "You knew?"

Hiccup nodded. "Of course I noticed. Ever since I saw him on Stormfly's back when we were trying to defend the dragon's nest from Drago's attacks."

"But-but-but how could you hide something like that!?" Snotlout reacted, then frowned once again at Hiccup. "Wait, but you were jealous of the new kid, weren't you? You even believed the rumors of them sneaking up behind your back andâ€"

"â€"Actually, Snotlout, I never \_truly\_ believed those rumors were true." Hiccup cut the boy off. Sounding and acting as calm as usual. Just to irritate Snotlout even more. "However, I \_did\_ feel very uncomfortable hearing so much about it. At times, hearing those rumors only made me doubt my own feelings."

"But, how couldn't you get angry? I'd want to tear apart the man's limbs if I were you. How can you be so thoughtless?"

"The only one being thoughtless here, Snotlout, is you." Hiccup turned to his cousin. His expression turned from serene to sharp and serious, "You see, there is something you must learn from being someone else's partner."

"Oh, yeah, and what is that, mister\_ I-know-it-all?\_" Snotlout snarled.

"When you are with Hookfang, you must trust he won't let you fall off his back and drown in the waters, right?" Hiccup asked. Making Snotlout stay silent for a while. Dropping his sight to the grounds as he thought through Hiccup's question and how to answer it. Hiccup took advantage of Snotlout's silence and continued talking, "Well, same happens with me and Toothless. I have to trust him every time we are in a dark place and only \_he\_ can see through it. Same with Astrid."

Snotlout rose a brow up at him, "Astrid sees in the dark?"

Hiccup sighed exasperated, "No, Snotlout. What I mean is, as much as I trust Toothless when riding him, I trust Astrid when she is interacting with other people. I trust she won't betray me in any way as much as she trusts me to do the same for her."

Snotlout didn't answer to that. Which only gave Hiccup enough time to chuckle and rest his hand on Snotlout's shoulder, patting it gently.

"You now, someday, when you meet the right woman for you, you might as well understand what I mean."

Snotlout growled within and slapped Hiccup's hand off of him. "Shit, why do you always have to sound like you are all perfect?"

"I'm not." Hiccup flatly responded while turning his attention back to Eret, who flicked his finger upwards at Skullcrusher.

The Rumblehorn started to flap his wings and fly up to where Berkians used to gather and watch the fights in the arena.

"Truth is, Snotlout, the fact that I trust her, doesn't mean I don't get jealous at times." Hiccup mumbled. Knowing Snotlout had shot his sight back at him. "It bothers me, yes. But it's only natural. I'm human and also a manâ€œ"

"Oh, shut up Hiccup. You're giving me nauseas." Snotlout cut him off and narrowed his brows as his head turned to face up ahead and watch how Astrid cracked her neck to the left side and smirked up at Eret, who swung his sword in his hand.

"Remember Astrid," Fishlegs pointed out, "Eret is the bad guy. He will do everything he can to destroy you."

"Got it." Astrid said as she simply waited for Eret to make the first move.

Drawing his sword back over his head, Eret roared like a beast as he brought it down at her. Crashing sword with sword as he lifted hers over her face, and pushed forward. Their swords were one against the other, metal scratching metal. Jaws clenching and feet buried to the ground.

Astrid and Eret shared the same position. They both shared the same desire to compete on who would end up showing to be stronger than whom.

Astrid took advantage of his urge to push her down to the ground to spit on his face and use that brief second of his loosened hold to kick on his knees and then punch his cheek.

Eret kneeled. Wiping his face clean and swinging his other arm against her legs to have her fall on her back. Her hand unconsciously let go of the shield and Eret kicked it away from her reach.

Groaning within, Astrid squeezed her eyes shut and gritted her teeth. When she felt his shadow over her, her eyes opened and saw him start to stand up. She kicked her boot against his chest.

Her foot sent him two steps away from her. Enough space for her to jump back on her feet and aim her sword at his chest. Holding her sword in both hands, raising her arms over her head.

When she moved her arms forward, their swords crashed together once again.

Eret, applied a stronger pressure until their swords lowered to their chests and their eyes met.

As his eyes locked into her deep ones, the old image of a beautiful lady he once in his teenage years had in his arms but right after loving her, she was taken away from himâ€”had replaced Astrid's eye-color.

Feeling his grip loosening on the sword, Astrid pushed forward and moved their swords to her right side, pushing her knee against his gut. Smacking her sword's pommel on the back of his head and knocking him down to the floor.

Fishlegs nodded back at Snotlout, who had grabbed his hammer and ran furiously toward Astrid. She crouched to the ground once Snotlout swung the hammer over her head and kicked on his ankles. He fell on his back.

When she straightened her back and glared down at the boys she had just taken down, she threw her sword to the ground and tightly balled her fists. "What's the matter with you two!?" she spat, "You've learnt nothing! A sheep can do better than that."

"I still find it dumb to fight against a girl, Astrid." Snotlout groaned as he tried to sit back up on the ground.

"And, what if Osch's army includes women? Are you going to just, let them be and spare their lives until they slit your throat out?"

No one answered her. No one had ways to answerâ€”best said. Truth was, she was right. No matter how feminine or innocent their opponent might seem like. They couldn't let their guard fall back to the ground.

Her eyes darted back to Eretâ€”who still laid flat on the ground. Watching him like that only made her feel angrier. A big and buff man like him should be the one standing in her place and screaming for his opponent to get up from the ground and keep fighting. Whatever happened to this man while trying to fight her, wasn't going to keep him alive if he planned on doing it often. "And you," She said, "What the Hel happened to you? You were doing just fine on the first few days of training."

Eret hesitated to answer. While he intended to pull himself back together and sit on the ground as he recovered his balance and shook his head side to side, he thoughtâ€”Boy, that woman hits mercilessly hard.

Rubbing the back of his neck, Eret then sighed the words, "Forgive me, fair lady. I...I just got a little distracted."

"That distraction may cost you your life, and the lives of those you intend to protect!" Astrid said.

Eret looked up at her with an apologetic expression, "We may as well try one more time."

As fascinating as his offering sounded to her, Astrid shook her head in denial once she began feeling her head getting heavyâ€”again.

Closing her eyes and bringing her knuckles to rub against her



forehead for a quick second, Astrid's lips parted and her voice sounded very much softer than how she would want it to be. "No, tomorrow will be another day. Just, practice on your fighting skills."

Few seconds later, her head finally stopped feeling heavy and her eyes reopened. Her chin lifted and she raised her voice as she started walking toward the exit and beckoned for Stormfly to follow. "Listen closely, all of you. Since we are obviously short of time for training, plans have changed. Training sessions will be cancelled. Hiccup will need you on different parts of the island either helping out with the forts or guarding any of the regions. If any of you have some time to spare and wish to practice on your battling skills, nothing should stop you from it. It is best if we are ready so Berk doesn't end up with a major amount of damage...again."

"So, does this mean we have nothing else to do now?" Tuffnut asked. Up from where he sat on Belch's neck.

"Of course we'll have plenty to do! Didn't you hear what she just said?" Snotlout hissed, "We have to guard the island, moron."

"Right. Since we don't know when Osch's armada will arrive, we must be ready." Fishlegs added.

"Exactly." Astrid said.

"First thing tomorrow morning, we will have a meeting at the Great Hall with our chief visitors. We will be discussing the plan of attack and determine how much time we have left before Osch's ships cross Berkian waters." Hiccup said.

"Does that mean we won't have a feast tonight to welcome our guests?" Snotlout asked.

"Not this time." Hiccup said. "I know it is tradition to welcome our guests with a feast. But we can't afford to have one before knowing exactly what we will do when the horns are heard."

"Hiccup's right, guys." Fishlegs said, "Vikings always find a reason to celebrate and be very scandalous. This time, we should set up our priorities first."

"We can have a feast once we settle everything." Hiccup said. "You know, as a way to relax from all the planning, working and training."

"Sounds fair enough." Eret said.

"Don't miss on the meeting then." Astrid said, "Hiccup and I expect to see each and every one of you there." She waved at them, "I'll see you guys around." With that, her heavy steps led her out of the academy.

Hiccup moved to follow her until his arm was held back by his mother's grasp.

Valka pulled him close enough for her to speak words that only his

ears could catch. "Hiccup, I think it's time for you and Astrid to return to the Haddock home."

"What, why?" Hiccup's question didn't succeed in hiding how much he actually didn't want to leave the cabin where he and Astrid had been staying since they got married.

Moving back to the Haddock home meant that Toothless was probably going to claim his spot in Hiccup's room and that his mom would be sleeping downstairs.

It was the thought that he couldn't do all the things he'd gotten well used to doing while being alone with Astrid that made him react the way he suddenly did. Like, making love without the fear of being heard by someone, or even messing around the house like two little siblings. He thought Toothless was well comfortable and pleased staying in his very own hut with Stormfly, how could Hiccup even bring himself to break that apart?

Yes, the original agreement was to spend about seven days or so after their marriage by themselves at the cabin. But as their schedule kept getting tighter and tighter, they never really found a chance to move back into the Haddock home.

On the other hand, he missed being close to his mother. To get to make up for the years lost.

Then, the following whispers from his mother made him rethink on everything all over again. "Astrid may say that she feels alright, but we all know how stubborn she might get at times. I believe, that if I am around more often, I could keep a wary eye on her and make sure it is nothing we should feel concerned of."

Hiccup's gaze fell to the ground. "You're right...in all the years I've known Astrid, I have never seen her get this dizzy and faint like that. For once, I don't think this is part of a prank." He was completely sure of it, he knew that fainting because someone played a prank on you was very different from what they all witnessed that day.

"It's not, Hiccup." Fishlegs came in. Making Hiccup realize him and his mother may not be talking as low as originally intended. When his eyes moved back up and around the academy, he noticed they were the only ones left in there—including their dragons.

"I asked the twins and Snotlout if they had anything to do in all of this unusual behavior from Astrid, and they said they didn't have any part on this. My thoughts, is that she might be experiencing some kind of food poisoning." Fishlegs said.

"It can't be food poisoning, Fishlegs." Hiccup assured.

"H-How are you so sure?" Fishlegs asked.

"Because just a few days ago, she had indigestion. The first time I heard her say that, I believe it was the night you guys left to the islands of Iceso and Larlis." Hiccup explained.

"This is something far more serious than just a coming and going indigestion or food poisoning." Valka said. Gazing at the Academy's

gate. Remembering Astrid's heavy steps as she left the training grounds.

Hiccup looked at her in curiosity, "Uh, mom?" He called, "Do you know something we don't?"

Valka snapped out of it. Looking down at her son and then shaking her head in denial, "It is just a hunch, Hiccup. But I believe that we should still keep a discrete eye on her."

"Right. We don't want Astrid to get all scary at us. Again." Fishlegs said.

Hiccup nodded, "True. I'll just go talk to her."

Valka placed a hand on her son's arm, "We will be waiting for any news on her health status."

"It won't be easy." Hiccup sighed aloud, knowing Astrid was too stubborn to ever admit that she was actually feeling ill or hurt. He was grateful enough that she had been opening up to him about how she felt lately, but he also knew she had her limits.

Hiccup beckoned for Toothless. As he mounted his dragon, he narrowed his eyes at his friend and mother, "...but I will tell you this, if Astrid continues getting dizzy and keeps on denying how she feels, then I will bring Gothi to the house when she least expects me to. She might want to keep a tough mask now that we are about to get ourselves into another battle, but that doesn't take away the fact that I will still do anything I can to support her."

Valka smiled, not seeing Hiccup when he started to talk once he got on Toothless. No, she was now seeing Stoick. The way Hiccup spoke so dear of Astrid only reminded her of how Stoick always tried to search ways to protect her when they were either lovers or already married. It all seemed too familiar to her. The way Hiccup talked, how he furrowed his brows when he was serious, how he was willing to honor and support his love for Astrid at all costs, how he so tenderly looked at her, how his rough hands touched her as if she was a porcelain doll despite knowing she could probably kick his ass better than what he could "everything. Seemed like watching Stoick before her eyes. Well, a shorter and a lot slimmer version of Stoick.

She was proud of her son. With each day that passed, she had one more reason to feel proud of him.

Being those his very last words before he leaned down and petted on Toothless' sides to take off, Valka and Fishlegs exchanged the kind of glances that only two concerned family members would be able to make.

Fishlegs cleared his throat, "I didn't want to say this in front of Hiccup," sighs "But now that I think of things through, I realize that there is a small yet very important detail we are forgetting."

Valka tilted her head to the side as she listened, "What is?"

Fishlegs shook his head, "My parents brought the news to me when I was just a small boy. But I remember them just as if it was yesterday when I heard them." pauses to look away at the Academy's gate, "Vincent, died of a mysterious illness when Astrid was somewhere in her early childhood." Turns to look at Valka, "What if Astrid also has this mysterious illness?"

Valka didn't find words to answer him. She just remained silent as she studied the boy's frightened expression before her. Yes, the thought of a mysterious illness also crawled into her mind as one of few reasons she could think of. But it certainly was not the one that convinced her the most. All she could bring herself to say, was, "Research about such illness. We will then compare the symptoms according to what we have seen. Although I doubt it has anything to do with what happened to her father."

Fishlegs nodded. "Should we tell Hiccup?"

Valka shook her head, "Not yet. Let him speak to her first and have her checked by Gothi. We cannot risk to worry him unnecessarily." her tongue moistened her lips for a quick second, "Hopefully" Gothi will give us a bright answer."

\* \* \*

><p>"Astrid?"<p>

His calls weren't answered. Not since he walked up the stairs to their room.

Hiccup knew something was happening. He couldn't guess what it was, but it definitely frightened him the fact that Astrid's health wasn't really giving him any positive thoughts.

Stormfly was in her hut and already sleeping. Which only made him assume Astrid was also in the house.

"Astrid?" He tried one last time once he stood behind the closed door of their room and slowly pushed it open.

"In the washroom!" She called back.

Sighing in relief, Hiccup walked into their room and went over to the washroom to see her.

On the dresser, there was a cup. When Hiccup spotted it, he took the cup in his hand. It was empty. He brought it to his nose and sniffed its insides. Narrowing his eyes when the strong smell pierced through his nostrils and sent shivers down his spine. "SnowBell. Bleck!" He spat, putting the cup back on the dresser and going back to the washroom.

Seriously, how can she drink that disgusting thing?â€"he thoughtâ€"Does it even work anyway?

The washroom door was half closed. His feet stopped just two steps from the door and then stepped back enough to hide his body from any chances of her seeing him as he hid behind the invisible shadows from the wall and moved only his head forward. Watching her unbraided hair. Giving her back to him.

She was wearing that same long sleeved maroon tunic she usually does for sleep, and her leggings. Barefooted.

With the cold weather that draped over Berkâ€”and Astrid is barefooted.

\_How can she not feel cold without any socks on?â€”\_he thought.

Then, it happened. As soon as his eyes moved back up to her, he noticed how her hands fell from her almost completely loose hair and quickly moved to hold her head still. The soft moans she emitted made him frown at the thought of being stupid enough to watch her sway when he could help her out.

But \_how\_ could he help her exactly? His feet were grounded to the hardwood. Hiccup knew nothing when it came to Astrid feeling ill. The only thing he'd done for her whenever she got ill, is prepare her favorite chicken broth with fresh vegetables. Asides from trying to keep her fever down.

And \_that\_ was the odd part...when he touched her back at the Academy, she didn't have a fever. She was violently sweating, yes. But her entire face was as \_cold\_ as ice \_and\_ all the color on her skin had gone away. It scared himâ€”it still does.

As his feet finally moved forward, silently walking into the washroom and gently rest his palm on the lowest of her slim back, her body flinched and then turned to him. Her hands moved from her head and her eyes stared startled up at his own. "I thought you'd come in later." She said.

"I just came to tell you," as he spoke, his eyes searched all over her in just a few seconds. Making sure she was truly alright. Or at least...\_trying\_ to make himself believe that. "â€”Gobber needs me at the shop for a while. We are making new weapons all over again, now that we might need them."

Astrid nodded. Holding onto his forearms after feeling his hands hold her waist.

His face leaned forward, trying to search for her honest eyes, hoping they could tell him whether she was in pain or not. "Don't wait for me. I might come in a lot later."

"I know." She muttered, then moved out of his hold and walked out of the washroom when he took a hold of her arm and pulled her back to him. Locking her in his embrace.

Ever since the gang left with Eret to find some help from the other tribes, Hiccup and Astrid had had extra time to share with one another. There wasn't a day, that they wouldn't allow themselves fall back into the rivers of pleasure and love. Spending so many nights making love with her, only gave him the courage he had never had in his life to pull her into his embrace every time he pleased and knew she also needed his arms to hold.

He didn't care if she would push him away or punch him for being so bold. He wanted to make sure she understood the fact that he was

there for her whenever she needed him even if it would cost him his breath.

She had been silent about how she felt, how her health was. But he also knew he wanted to hold her and let his arms tell her that sometimes it was okay to be human. That it isn't a sin nor a crime to feel pain or to feel illâ€”Even if she was as strong as a boulder.

Feeling her face hiding in his neck and her arms lock around his shoulders gave him a special cue to tighten their hug. However, her whispers sent a sudden wave of shock through his spine, "I don't understand what is wrong with me..."

Her voice was a little shaky and he could feel her arms tighten around his shoulders and her fingers bury on his upper back. As if asking him with her boy not to dare and let her go.

This was rare of her. Suddenly saying that she couldn't understand something when it came to her own body. Yes, it was rare. But not new. No, they have already revealed this side of each other before.

Unlike Hiccup, when Astrid opened up like this, he had to stay silent. Simply because he knew she could change her mind fast and not say anything at all. In this case, he learned to stay silent and listen carefully to what her heart was trying to say.

His eyes moved around the room and spotted one, two, three, four, five, sixâ€”six used clothes on the floor by the tub. Six of which three were covered in a bright scarlet, two of them had a lighter red and one only had a few red stains.

Astrid...?â€”his thoughts called, his heart felt as if someone had just squeezed it tightly. Though her whispering voice made him look away from the used cloths and back down at their bodies that still fed from the wonderful warmth they shared.

"...I tried, I swear, I am trying to figure out a logical answer." she continued, "But no matter what I do, nothing seems to be clear enough." Pauses, "Don't think that those cloths are from my monthly comings, that's not it..."

Of course it can't be It.â€”Hiccup thoughtâ€”we made love last night. And the night before and the night before it, and...Come to think of it, you haven't gotten your monthly visit yet since before our wedding, right?â€”even though he thought of words, he couldn't bring himself to spell them out. It was like something was keeping him from opening his mouth for the moment.

"This has never happened before, I wish I knew how to figure something out like I always do, and fast. But turns out I don't know just yet." She continued, "We have so many things on our shoulders, it is unfair for us that something like this adds up to our troubles."

Hiccup's lips finally parted, "How are you so sure that your monthly coming isn't behind all this?"

She pulled back just enough for their eyes to meet, "Because this

kind of bleeding has only happened twice. And both times involve the same painful twinge inside me."

Hiccup slid a hand up her back. Finding her chin, rubbing his thumb against her skin, "Then will find the answers to this, together."

Even if she knew they could and would find the solution to this tiny problem together, all she could think of, was that the sooner those sudden headaches and stomachaches stop tormenting her, the better chances she had to smash a few bodies when battle came up. All she actually thought of, was being well enough to fight. \_

Hiccup then pulled her back into the embrace. For a longer while, their bodies stayed together. He knew now it was the time to get Gothi to take a good look at Astrid. He knew Astrid might not like the idea, but he was willing to do anything to convince her that getting checked was necessary. As his fingers slowly began to comb her hair, a large part of him hoped to hear that this was all just part of being anxious about everything that was going on around them. He just, refused to believe something was wrong.

## 17. Whispering Shadows

"By the time the Hollibusians cross the borderline, we must be more than ready to greet them back. If they are wise enough, then they might want to wait until nightfall in order to attack without being seen. What they are not expecting, is that we will be waiting for them at night, as well." Hiccup explained, as his eyes moved over each and every one of the heads he could see at the Great Hall.

As previously scheduled, the meeting was held first thing in the morning, the day after greeting clans Feyvor and Smorton. Apparently, neither Clan Feyvor nor Clan Smorton were aware of the situation going on Berk for the past few monthsâ€"but, that was something Hiccup had agreed to discuss in private with the other two chiefs.

Now, they were discussing the attack and defense strategy they would use when the time came for battling against Osch's army.

Gathered around the large wooden table with a hearth in its center, Hiccup tried to make his voice sound loud enough for everyone that surrounded said table to hear him without any difficulty.

Present, Astrid was standing by Hiccup's right. Followed by Gobber, Gothi the Elder, Phlegma, Spitelout Jorgenson, the Thorstons, the Ingermans, Matlus, Matlus' troop captain, Souzbog, Souzbog's troop captain, Big-Boobied Bertha, Snotlout, Ruffnut, Tuffnut, Eret, Fishlegs, Bucket, Mulch, and Valkaâ€"who sat by Hiccup's left. Few other villagers were also present, but didn't have the same rights to speak as the ones that formed part of the chief's council.

Under Hiccup's hands, rested the map of their archipelago. Astrid gently took the charcoal pencil from Hiccup's hand once she heard Mulch ask, "But how do we know when will we attack? Do we have to wait until we see their ships appearing on the horizon to blow on the horns, or what?"

"No. Once they cross this line." Astrid said. Drawing a line on the waters between Pickletow Island and Dragon Island. "We should be able to spot them easily if we have a friendly moonlight, but that will only happen if we get lucky enough."

"And if there is no moon that night?" Snotlout asked. Crossing his arms over his chest. "What, are we going to let ourselves be surprised when fire rocks start blasting against our homes?"

"Chances are most likely to be positive for us." Fishlegs said, pressing his forefinger at the right page of what seemed to be a book of stars and cosmos opened in front of him. "I have calculated the time we have until they reach our waters and determined that by then, the earth, moon and sun should be in approximate alignment."

"And?" Snotlout's eyelids were heavy on his eyes as he looked back at Fishlegs.

"Means that we might have full moon that night." Hiccup explained.

"Ooouh!" Tuffnut exhaled, "You could have said that earlier," Glares at Fishlegs, "Why do you always try to confuse people?"

"The full-moon part is still not clear, but I am certain that if my calculations are accurate enough, then the moon will be present anyway." Fishlegs added. "A little light is better than no light at all, right?"

"So," Tuffnut began, "By that, you mean that we are to lay our trust on a gigantic white cheese which we can't even grab and have a big bite of, and that for some mysterious reason, shines at night" just so we can kick some asses and rip some teeth out?"

Everyone stared at the blonde twin, wondering if the boy needed some immediate mental assistance or just for someone to slam a big book against his head until Hiccup unhurriedly lowered his head" still gazing at the male-twin as he slowly responded, "Uh" yes."

Tuffnut scoffed at Fishlegs, waving both arms in exasperation, "See? Why do you have to talk in such a confusing language?!" His eyelids draped over his eyes and his mouth hung vaguely. His right wrist dangled in the low air, "Seriously dude, not cool."

"Expect no less from a book-idiot." Snotlout mocked.

Fishlegs pouted at Snotlout and Tuffnut, "For your information, science, is not confusing. It is the open gate to a world full of knowledge and wisdom. Those that limit their way to knowledge, lack of the skills to use their brain correctly."

"Hehe, yeah, and then your brain turns into mutton." Ruffnut teased.

Palms slam against the table, "Hey! Are you saying that my cranium is filled with mutton?" Snotlout hissed over at Fishlegs.

"Do I really need to answer that?" Fishlegs asked.



"Guys, that's enough." Hiccup said. "This is important."

"Even if we do have the moonlight on our side," Eret began, trying to steal away the attention that was suddenly placed on Snotlout and Fishlegs, "We must think of a plan B."

"Hate to say it, but pretty-boy here is right. Remember that there are still doers around." Snotlout said, "Like me!" He then shrugged both shoulders, pointing at Hiccup and Fishlegs, "Although, I don't actually expect nerd-heads like you two to come up with a plan that's more graphic."

Fishlegs kept the straight face at Snotlout, who just rolled his eyes and looked away.

Keeping a stern face at Snotlout, also thinking how unnecessary his comment was, Astrid said, "I agree with Eret." her words only made Hiccup turn to look at her. Her gaze moved down at the map resting under his hands. Then, she continued, "As much as I love the fact that we have geniuses among us that would be passionate enough to spend day and night studying about the possibilities on our side and those against us, we also need to think as if we have no other choice but to trust our Viking instinct."

"Says the doer!" Snotlout cheered.

"Shut it!" Ruffnut spat. Swinging her mug against Snotlout's helmet. "Geesh, so annoying!"

"Thank you, Ruffnut." Astrid said between gritted teeth.

Eret squeezed himself in, "Uh, and yes. What the lady Astrid says is true. I mean no offense to my young chief or any wise men in here, but nearly every one of us here have depended more on several planned strategies in case one of them fails." Eret knew, that none of them could expect the entire Viking race to use scientific knowledge or logic overnight.

"Or no planification at all." Gobber mumbled. Knowing that whenever danger sticks its nose nearby, Vikings usually just instinctively react and attack without any sense of planning or coordination.

Astrid and the gang probably understood Hiccup and Fishlegs' mad-science-language. But it was only because they all grew up together and still, they weren't that used to it just yet. If that was them, then what about the rest of the village?

"I say," Matlus began, "We send small groups on different regions of the big island, Berk, that is. Groups on the smaller islands as well while on sea, the armada awaits."

Everyone fell silent. Again. Glancing at each other's faces in wonder.

Matlus snorted, slightly displeased at the thought that his idea didn't sound as good as it did in his mind. "Airg! What is an archipelago?" He asked, glancing at everyone in the gathering.

"A group of islands with not much distance from one another?"

Fishlegs asked.

"Ah-hah!" Matlus cheered, "A group of islands. Big rocks spacious enough to walk around and get a good suntan!" He snickered, his tone then getting a little deeper, "But also, big enough ta hide a \_cannon."\_

"That's right..." Hiccup mumbled to himself, "By dividing ourselves into groups all around the archipelago, we can get a closer look at the Hollibusian's location and send safe signals at the rest without being easily spotted." He glanced at Matlus, "Brilliant!"

"Ei not just that," Gobber nodded "If we are fast and accurate enough, we may as well protect Berk from getting a single shot of damage. They won't be expecting ta be attacked soon before even getting to Berk, that is."

"Sounds like a plan." Souzbog agreed. "Each group shall take a fair amount of cannons and catapults with em'."

"That said, each group will get everything prepared as soon as possible." Hiccup said, "Does anyone have an objection to this?"

"Not an objection," Spitelout said, "More like a question."

Hiccup nodded once, giving Spitelout the word he just solicited.

"What about the giant lizards?" Spitelout asked, "They'll get in our way and ruin everything!"

"Spitelout's right." Bertha said. "How are we to trust the beasts?" Huffs, "How are we sure that they won't just start vomiting fire when we least expect it and cause more damage than what they have already done ever since they came to existence?"

"Astrid has done an amazing job directing the dragon training lessons and the guys have managed to practice countless times with them." Hiccup stepped in. First glaring at Bertha, then moving his sight at every single head in the room, "Dragons are \_not\_ stupid. You should all know that by now."

"They can even be smarter than all of us together." Astrid teased. Crossing her arms over her chest and shifting her weight on her right hip. "Anyway, the dragons \_must stay\_ on the Big Island. This will provide us with better defensive viewpoints while we Vikings focus on the rest." Astrid then hurried to clear out, "Remember, no matter what, we \_have\_ to protect Berk."

"Ah, codswallop!" Bertha shouted. "They are nothing more than \_pests!\_"

"Bertha's right." Spitelout said, "They may have learned something from us, but they are still wild animals that will attack based on instinct. I do not trust this plan of yours if ye're going to include the dragons in it."

"Uh, dad?" Snotlout lowered his head, trying not to sound disrespectful, "You know how I hate to argue with you and all that,

but dragons only attack when they are startled."

"Or if someone close to them is in danger." Ruffnut said.

"As a matter of fact, we all alter our ways of behavior if we feel threatened." Fishlegs pointed out, "Humans and wild animals share the same innate response to matters of attack and defense. Right now, we are developing a plan to start a fight because we were threatened. Otherwise, each and every one of you would be either fishing for tonight's meal or chopping wood to keep your homes warm. Well, it's the same when it comes to dragons. They attack only if they feel like their lives are in danger."

"Or controlled by a screaming psycho riding a Bewilderbeast." Ruffnut muttered to herself. She then clicked her tongue in annoyance as she glared at the adults, "Seriously people, you should all be used to hearing the same shit over and over for more than five years already!"

"I say we lock em' dragons up until we are done with everything." Bertha said. "See if we can get rid of those giant demons for once."

"Mother," Astrid growled within her breath from across the table.

"Astrid...?" Bertha snarled back. As if daring her to go any further into speaking up against her mother's word.

"Astrid," Hiccup called in low whispers, placing his hand on Astrid's forearm to keep her from probably eating her mother alive. He wasn't looking forward to witness the same scene he did yesterday at the docks.

Astrid's arm muscles relaxed under his touch. Giving him the chances to glance back at everyone else and speak, "Alright, we will divide ourselves into groups, then. Each group will have a region assigned and each group will consist of two leaders. Those leaders will have the responsibility to gather Vikings to be part of their assigned areas."

Hiccup looks at His far right, "Phlegma, Spitelout, you will take over the Far East."

Both, Spitelout and Phlegma looked at each other, then nodded in agreement.

"Snotlout, Fishlegs, Ruff and Tuff, you will go south." Hiccup continued. Taking the charcoal pencil from Astrid's hand to mark on the map the already assigned regions by writing the first two letters of their names, "Astrid, Eret, you will go Northwest."

"Hey, why does she always gets to be with my big guy?" Ruffnut interrupted.

Snotlout huffed within, "Few years ago, it used to always be me the one she gets to go withâ€¦"

Hiccup ignored both of them and just continued talking, "Gothi, keep an eye from above as you always do."

Gothi nodded once.

"Ingermans', west." Hiccup said. "Bucket and Mulch, you will be on Dragon Island. Matlus and Souzbog, Pickletow Island and of course, the ships."

Both visiting chiefs nodded, "The captain of our troops will be in charge of the fleets." Souzbog said.

"Excellent." Hiccup agreed, then glanced back at his mom, "Mom, you and I will go north."

Valka nodded once as well.

"Gobber, stay in Berk and make sure the dragons and everything else is in order." Hiccup continued, "And since we are going to split up, then I suggest that each group has at least one dragon included."

"And why is that?" Spitelout asked, seeming aggravated by the idea.

"Because that way, it will be easier to go from one island to the other if we have to communicate." Astrid responded.

"Not to mention, a lot faster." Fishlegs said.

"â€"and if anything gets out of hand, they will be the ones who will take the group's leader to get some help from the other dragons." Hiccup added.

"This means, that dragons are not excluded from the plan." Ruffnut grinned up at Spitelout and Bertha, "So get used to it if you haven't yet."

"Ruffnut Thorston!" Ingrid Thorston stood from her seat. Glaring down at her daughter.

The least Ruffnut did, was to put on a mask of apologetic expressions. She just rebelliously sunk her head in her shoulders and crossed her arms over her chest. Looking away from the woman that could have already pulled from her ear if she were close enough.

Hiccup cleared his throat and set the pencil down on the table. Slowly rising from his chair. Thinking that there was nothing more needed to be discussed. He knew that if they continued talking about how the dragons will be included in the plan, then they would probably never come to a solid agreement with those that still disagree with a dragon's companionship.

Before he could say something more, Eret stood from his seat and nodded once at his chief, "I am with you, chief."

About four seconds later, Gothi silently rose from her seat, holding her staff in both hands and slightly bowing at her chief.

Gobber rose his prosthetic hand-mug, "Count me in!"

"Me too!" Ruffnut said. Raising her right fist up high.

"Yeah, and me!" Tuffnut followed, "Let's smash some bones!"

"Yeah!" Snotlout cheered. Hitting fist against palm.

Fishlegs, his parents, and the Thorstons glanced back at the chief. Their willing smiles revealed their answer quite clearly.

"We have an accord then!" Souzbog clapped his hands, pleased. He then turned to face a tall and muscular man standing right next to him. "Spread the message, Captain!" he said.

Souzbog's troop captain nodded and slightly bowed his head at his chief, "Yes, sir!" With that, the captain left the Great Hall.

Matlus glanced at the man he had in charge as Captain of his own troops and motioned his head to the side. Not really feeling the need to say the words so that the man would nod, quickly bow and then leave the building as well to deliver the news.

"The moment an enemy ship trespasses this line, we will consider it as an indirect threat and step in." Astrid says. Pointing at the line she traced earlier on the map. "Under no circumstances, we may allow them to get anywhere near the big island." She gazed at everyone. "Understood?"

"Heeih!" Everyone yelled in unison. Followed by loud cheers and applause of satisfaction.

"Ooh goodie!" Snotlout turns to face Tuffnut, "You know what that means now, don't you?"

Tuffnut thought about it for a long second, dropping his jaw, "Uuhâ€|thatâ€|we...um..." Sighs aloud, dropping his arms on either sides, "Aai, I've got nothingâ€|Does it involve hitting someone on the head?"

"What? No! Means that now it's time for a feast!" Snotlout exclaimed, punching the air above him, "Woo! Yeah, baby! Mead and babes all around!" Sighs in awe, "The very definition of paradise."

"Ugh, you disgust meâ€|" Ruffnut muttered, quickly pushing herself away from the table and walking to the nearest barrel of mead.

"Reasons as to why you should consider my loyal companionship, darling." Fishlegs said to Ruffnut, fixing his leather vest on his chest, grinning proudly.

As everyone else started to mind their own business, Hiccup took Astrid's hand in his and without giving her a chance to protest, he pulled her from the crowd and guided her to a separate corner. "Hiccup, what are you doing?" She asked.

Hiccup didn't respond, instead, he let go of her hand and backed away from her. Making way for Gothi to step in.

Few steps behind Gothi, Fishlegs and Valka stood. Giving the elder

enough space to do her job. Soon after, Snotlout, the twins and Hiccup joined them. Watching every single movement Gothi made as she touched both of Astrid's palms, cupped her cheeks to check her temperature, peered into her eyes, and even gently rubbed against her neck to check for any inflammation.

Snotlout began to try and catch Ruffnut's attention by violating her personal space and say empty promises to her. Trying to effortlessly make up for showing how excited he was for the upcoming feast.

Tuffnut? Well, he found entertainment by just admiring the hair on his forearm and curiously poking at it. Hoping to see the hair go back into the paleness of his forearm if he pushes it back down.

It surprised Hiccup how calm and silent Astrid was while Gothi groped on her hips and continued doing all kinds of strange touching on her. What he didn't know, was that while Astrid's body was being carefully inspected by the Wise Elder, her mind had abandoned them all and traveled through the rivers that lead to the Realm of Memories.

Last night, Hiccup couldn't bring himself to make Astrid go to Gothi's hut at that time of the night. Astrid insisted that it was better if they waited for the next day. Because it would be unfair to barge into her house at such a disrespectful time of the night. Yet, she didn't expect Hiccup to take the words \_'Lets wait till tomorrow\_' so seriously.

After their long embrace in the entrance of their washroom, Hiccup told Astrid how his mom wanted them to return to the Haddock home. He explained how he would feel more at peace if he knew that she won't be by herself at home if he isn't there. That at least, she will have someone he trusted close by if the coming and going mysterious pain ever returned.

To his surprise, the only response he got from Astrid, was a short nod. As much as she hated to admit it, Astrid knew that Hiccup only did this because he cared for her. She just couldn't bring herself to allow her headstrong attitude take over and reject his aid. At least, not for long.

Later that night, Astrid sent Hiccup to the armory so he could go on and do what Gobber had asked him to do. He said he would come back later in the night, but truth was, Hiccup \_never\_ returned home that night. He got so lost in the weapon-making that he lost track of time until he heard the singing terrible terrors announcing morning.

Then again, Hiccup wasn't the only one that didn't get a good night sleep. Astrid couldn't bring herself to close her eyes that night either. The twinge didn't return, thoughâ€”thankfully. But for some unknown reason, she just couldn't fall asleep. To make time speed up, she spent the night packing a good amount of clothes and supplies to take back to the Haddock home.

Around four in the morning, Astrid left the cabin. She walked in silence down the hill to what once was Hiccup and Stoick's house and that now was about to become her home as well.

She used the spare key Hiccup had provided her when they were still dating. Just as she provided him with a spare key to her houseâ€”in

case an emergency came up.

When she entered the house, being especially cautious not to make any noise as to wake Valka upâ€”she found \_the woman\_ sitting on a chair by the hearth, staring lost at the fire.

The memory of how things went that early morning flowed like clear waters in her mind as she replayed it all in her headâ€¦

\_"Um...Hey, uhâ€¦|Good morning. Hiccup gave me a spare key..." Astrid says.\_

\_Valka nods once, before flashing a small and gentle smile at the young woman standing by the open front door of her house, then beckoned her head for her to come closer, "I know. Please, come on in, and welcome."\_

\_"Thank you." Astrid mumbles and closes the door behind her. Flipping the key to lock it. She then slowly moved her feet forward, watching how Valka stood from her seat to offer it to Astrid. Astrid nodded her gratitude and set the bag of clothes and supplies on the sofa, holding a basket covered in a white cloth and placing it on the dining table before sitting on the chair Valka offered. Letting the awkward silence between them take over as she watched her husband's mother pull another chair from the dining table, set it by the fire on Astrid's opposite side and then sitting down.\_

\_Taking a hold of the large iron spoon leaning against the stoned borders of the fireplace, Valka dipped it in the cauldron and stirred its contents. "I was warming myself some yak milk. Would you like some?"\_

\_The sole thought of something going down her throat suddenly felt queasy and weird. Not only because everything she chowed down resulted in making her feel like she was having a war inside her stomach, but also because of all the thoughts that occupied her mind. Making her forget how essential getting the right nutrients was. Though as to not seem rude to Hiccup's mother, Astrid ended up nodding her response at her.\_

\_As if she had been reading Astrid's mind, Valka stands up, walks over to the kitchen, grabs two clean mugs and returns to her seat. Setting both mugs by her feet to stir the milk about four more times, "I understand you might not want anything to drink or eat at a time like this, but I trust the warmth will do you good. If possible, just a little." Valka says as she grabbed a mug, served the milk and offered it to Astrid. Then serving herself some.\_

\_The milk was tasteless. It could have even been considered as repulsive since it didn't have any flavor and only left a bitter taste in her tongue. Yet, sudden waves of warmth were sent through all of her muscles. Making her shoulders slowly drop and her heart beat pleasantly at the feeling going on inside her, "Hmâ€¦| you're right, feels really nice..." eyes close.\_

\_"At times like these, there is nothing better than to help ease our thoughts with some warm yak milk. Who could ever be able to relax when all these crazy things are happening around us?" Valka said. "And all at once, no less."\_

\_Hearing her, Astrid released a wry smile, "I may know of some people that could care less even if the world collapses. Snotlout and the twins."\_

\_Valka laughed, "Well, there is that exception."\_

\_Moments of deep silence passed. Having Astrid realize how serene she felt despite the thought of having this stranger sitting before her, drinking a cup of warm milk and enjoying the warmth that the fire in front of them emitted. Thinking now on how this stranger that turned out to be Hiccup's long lost mother, had been starting to look after her from the moment they allowed each other to get closer. Realizing how those barriers Astrid had unconsciously built between the two of them, gradually started crumbling down. As she thought of all the things she had thought of Valka from the moment she discovered Valka was Hiccup's mother, and then started to allow herself the benefit of getting to know her better, Astrid took in a deep breath and released it through her nostrils. Letting her gaze be lost in the rough movements of the fire flames in front of her. Seeing how they crept up the wood beneath, devouring it bit by bit.\_

\_Her body suddenly sinking into a sea of feelings she had never experienced before.\_

\_"Astrid?" Valka calls. Letting her voice echo through the silent living room, being the one that makes the cracking sound of fire burning wood not be the only thing that defied absolute quietness.\_

\_"Hm?"\_

\_"Shall I beg you forgiveness for the question I am daring myself to ask, but...have you been consuming anything besides from the usual meals?"\_

\_Astrid's gaze finally moved up from the fire, only to meet with the celadon color that adorned the two small gems on the woman's face. Her head moved back and forth as she whispered her response, "Not really..." looks back at the fire that soon felt far too distant to her even though it was right in front of her, "I know I've been behaving really irresponsibly, but I have my reasons as to it." Sighs, "I know I should have gone to see Gothi the second I felt so strange but, I didn't want to hear anything that would distract my thoughts from the things that are of priority to us now. Since I didn't experience anything weird for a few days afterwards, I thought I had no reasons to visit the Elder anyway. So I let it slide off. But then...what happened yesterday at the academy and at home, only made me realize I have been overlooking my own needs and now I was to pay the consequences. My prideful and obdurate behavior made things get out of hand when I least expected them to. Now Hiccup panics over every small detail and our friends might be suspecting that I could be developing a strange illness or something."\_

\_"How are you so sure?" about the illness part?" Valka asks.\_

\_Astrid faked a short snicker, "I may be a whole lot of things, but daft is definitely not one of them." Her gaze fell to the half empty mug in her hands. Her right thumb absently moving up and down against the cup. "I know that the first thing that could pop into Fishlegs or



Hiccup's head is the word 'illness' since my father's death. From the moment my father was declared ill, we all knew that the possibilities of his descendants to also have it, weren't that limited. Of course, he only had one daughter..." Voice fades out.\_

\_Valka just listens carefully. Knowing how much of a need Astrid might have to speak with someone without making the one listening to her feel overly concerned.\_

\_"I've been trying to figure out a reason to why my body has been reacting so strange lately. To think back on possibilities on my own. In silence. Just so that no one in our village gets alarmed. Including Gothi. The thought of piling one more worry on Hiccup's shoulders only made me back away from going to see The Elder." Astrid sighs "All because of my cravings to show how strong I am, enough to tame the pain myself and deal with it without anyone else intervening. All this time, I have only been thinking on what could be best if I limit the amount of weight that goes into Hiccup's shoulders."  
><em>

\_Valka nods once, in fair recognition. "Pride, makes us do many stupid things..." snickers sarcastically within, "I understand you, more than what you could ever imagine, Astrid. Sometimes, we think the people around us will be better off if we do not say or do things that might worry them. Ignoring that this only results in us making the worst decisions. Pride...stubbornness...misunderstandings...they all bundle up in the same box. And always end up blinding us."\_

\_"Right. All that's been happening, only angers me with every passing day." Astrid says, "Maybe it's true what you say. Allowing time to pass without paying attention to what my body has been trying to tell me." Sighs aloud in exasperation, "Not just that, all my life, I've been taught that the only thing that mattered the most was to keep the family honor untouched. To the Hoffersons, pain, is just a word that uselessly occupies the pages of a dictionary. I was taught to deal with things on my own and not to depend on anyone else. " Slightly shakes head in denial, then her eyes found Valka's once again, this time, her haze became a little sharper than expected, "Valka, I did not know what pain was like...Until the lack of oxygen woke me up in the middle of a stormy night and my insides felt like they were tearing apart."\_

\_Valka unconsciously chewed on her inner cheeks. Hiccup had mentioned to her a few days ago about the mysterious twinge Astrid had experienced the night Eret and the others left to the islands of Icso and Larlis. But she didn't think the situation wasâ€"thisâ€"serious. Hearing it from Astrid herself, Valka knew that there was more to this problem than just a simple episode of feeling dizzy and losing it for a second. Of course, it didn't surprise her to hear Astrid say such things. Simply because she knew Bertha would battle against giants only to have her daughter immune to weaknesses.\_

\_Weaknessâ€"and everything that comes with itâ€"was forbidden to Bertha Hofferson.\_

\_"Seems like we have to take action right away. Though I am very pleased to hear that you have finally recognized your mistake." Valka

says, then looks back down at the fire, "Besides, you are not the only one growing impatient, trust me." Snickers.\_

\_Astrid took another sip of the milk and closed her eyes. Deeply exhaling through her nostrils as her shoulders allowed all the tension to finally flee.\_

\_Valka's lips stretched into a warm smile as she watched her, "Warm milk or water does wonders."\_

\_"Can't and won't argue with that."\_

\_"You know, Astrid," Valka softly called, "I honestly doubt that you might be ill."\_

\_Astrid glanced back at her, "How are you so sure?"\_

\_Valka slightly chuckles, "I have seen many illnesses coming and going, Astrid. If you were to be experiencing a mysterious disease or some of the sort, then you wouldn't even been able to walk without breaking down into a nasty coughing. When something like this happens, that person is more likely to cough out blood. Nonstop." Shrugs slightly, "That, is a common symptom to grave illnesses that have attacked our kind for the past few centuries. Plus, the thought of a possibility that you might also go through the same tragic path Vincent did, doesn't sound very convincing to me."\_

\_Astrid tilted her head to the right, "Why is that?"\_

\_"Because, like I said, I've seen many things and learned many more throughout the years I've lived away from the human race and turns out that when it comes to matters of health, things are not as simple as we have been picturing them to be. For years, we've believed that if a parent gets ill and dies from it, then their children are most likely to have the same fate. Simply because it has happened so often, that we cannot help ourselves from believing that there might be a possibility that we could be wrong."\_

\_Seeing how Astrid just stared attentively at her, Valka moved her gaze back at the fire and took in a deep breath, carefully selecting the words she had to say, "There is no guarantee that I am right or wrong, Astrid. But, judging by how much I've gone through for the past forty-one years of my life, I dare beg you to please be patient. There is a reason as to why you have a family, isn't there? I think it is time for you to stop thinking about how Hiccup's life would be easier if you don't add up more reasons to worry him, to trust that you have a new life now as a married woman, and rely more on the vows you two exchanged when you promised eternal love and respect in front of the entire village. Believe it or not, I also thought the same way you have been thinking lately, and it only cost me twenty years away from the only family I ever had."\_

\_Their gaze met. "Do not, make the same mistake." Valka finished.\_

\_Something in Valka's shaky voice made Astrid's heart feel as if someone had buried its claws in it and then squeeze it until it released all the blood within. She never expected the woman to tell her something like that.\_

\_It all felt so strange and new to her. Not even her own mother had ever developed this kind of deep conversation with her. At some point, it felt secretly frightening and confusing, but all the while, she couldn't dare deny the fact that this foreign feeling, was oddly pleasant as well.\_

\_Silence returned. This time, it even lasted about two minutes and half. During that lapse of just silence between the two fair dragon riders, Valka's curious eyes explored Astrid's whole body and posture. Seeing how she kept her eyes closed while letting the milk's warmth ease her muscles' tension and chase away any possibilities of an upcoming abdominal crampâ€”Which only reminded her of a small detail she needed to clear out from her mind for once and allâ€”|\_

\_"Um, Astrid?" Valka called.\_

\_"Yes?"\_

\_"Earlier, you said you didn't consume anything other than regular meals...but...does that include any sorts of medications?"\_

\_Astrid's eyes opened. Her left brow rose as she parted her lips to make way for an answer, "I don't take any medications."\_

\_Hearing that, Valka leaned back against her chair, "Ah...good then." Welcoming another few seconds of deep silence in the room when Astrid suddenly flicked her tongue and tilted her head to the right.\_

\_"Hey, but...now that you mention it," She began, "I have been drinking SnowBell tea twice a day." Her deep blue eyes found Valka's image before laughing about it, "But that's ridiculous, isn't it? Hehe, to think the herbs my mother provides me with to prepare my own birth control remedy could be a reason as to why my body has been reacting so strange lately. Haha, the thought would never dare to cross my mind like that."\_

\_Valka's emotionless stare made Astrid's mocking laughter become an echo in the room. The forty-one year old woman suddenly looked like she had just seen a ghost, or an ice-breathing dragon eating lava rocks.\_

\_Astrid's throat gave way for a large and heavy amount of saliva go down her esophagus as she dared herself to ask, "Doâ€”|you think the SnowBell has something to do with my health issues, Valka?"\_

\_"Not sure." Valka immediately responded. She pushed one rebellious strain of hair behind her ear as she continued talking, "It could be something in the recipe that your body is trying to reject." Pauses, "Astrid, will you do something if I ask you to?"\_

\_Seeing how Astrid remained silent, Valka hurried the question in, "Would you stop taking the SnowBell for a few days?" Swallows shyly, "See what happens then?"\_

\_Astrid's eyes widened, "Butâ€”"\_

\_"Please," Valka cuts her off. "Do not ask me why, Astrid. But if I

ask this favor of you, not as Hiccup's mother, but as someone that is part of the village you so much crave to protect...will you listen?"\_

\_Astrid hesitates for a long while. Thinking of all the possibilities that could rain down on her as consequences of her rejection to the SnowBell, but then realizing how for once in such a long time, she should consider someone else's advice when it comes to her own health. At last, her head moved up and down, accepting.\_

\_Seeing her reaction, a large weight seemed to have been lifted from Valka's shoulder.\_

\_No more of Astrid's health was discussed that early morning. Valka had offered Astrid some more warm milk and the girl quickly stretched her mug so it could be refilled.\_

\_Valka's eyes drifted to the bag Astrid brought with her.\_

\_Later that morning, Astrid learned that Valka couldn't sleep either. Even though neither of them shared their reasons as to not being able to fall asleep, Astrid could clearly see through the serenity in the woman's eyes the same kind of concern she saw on Hiccup's when he looked at her back at the cabin after witnessing what happened to her in the washroom.\_

\_Though Valka didn't ask any more questions, Astrid couldn't help but to feel slightly upset after thinking that all for what she tried to avoid, was now happening right before her eyes.\_

\_To Astrid's surprise, the loft that once was Hiccup's room, now looked like an ordinary bedroom. There was a wooden wall built up to cover the view from the room down to the rest of the house.\_

\_Then it all came back to her. Remembering when they were all stressing out because of Osch's insisting on marrying Astrid to his son by force. When one day, not really on the best of her moods, Astrid searched for her dragon and found her taking logs of wood to the Haddock home. To top it off, Toothless was doing the same thing. When Astrid asked Valka what they were all up to, Valka just said that they were doing some remodeling. Of course, back then, Astrid hardly believed that statement was even true. Turns out, it was true. They were remodeling, and no less than Hiccup's room. Turning it into a more-private-room-for-two.\_

\_As Valka led Astrid up the stairs to what was now meant to be hers and Hiccup's room, Astrid noticed that Hiccup's Full-Sized bed had been replaced by a Queen-Sized one. The rest of the room was pretty much the same.\_

Finally, Astrid's thoughts came back to their present time—where her arms were being groped by Gothi. Astrid watched how The Elder made sure not to leave out any detail of her unchecked.

\_Hiccup probably told her everything by now—she thought—so, there is no need for me to say something, right?\_

Gothi then pulled back. Waving her hand at Astrid so she could have her full attention. When she did, the Elder made Astrid follow the movements of the staff with only her eyes as she slowly moved it to

the right, and then to the left.

After said exercise, Gothi pulled a small "empty" cup from the bag that hung from her left hip. She then brought the cup to Astrid's chin level.

Understanding what The Elder meant by that, Astrid started to chew on her inner cheeks so she could produce a fair amount of saliva in her mouth and then spat it down into the cup.

Gothi smiled. Pleased by Astrid's response as she stirred the cup in small circles and then placed it on the nearest table. From her bag, she pulled out a jar that was the size of about two fingers together. Half of the jar was filled with a bright-green paste.

"What is she doing?" Hiccup asked Fishlegs in whispers.

"That paste will determine if Astrid has some kind of parasite inside her body." Fishlegs began to explain, "After the green paste test, she has to perform the red and purple paste test. The red one is for the detection of bacteria while the purple one is for the detection of virus."

"How do we know if the test runs negative or not?" Hiccup asked.

"When the color in the paste's jar changes to red, then it is positive. That's on the parasite and virus detection test. When the color in the red paste's jar turns black, then it's a sign that is positive. When the color doesn't change at all, then it's negative." Fishlegs added.

As Fishlegs predicted, Gothi placed two more little jars on the table. One with purple paste in it and the other with red paste. She opened all three jars and poured a small amount of Astrid's saliva inside the one with the green paste. She placed the mug of saliva back on the table and then pulled a teaspoon from her bag, starting to stir the jar's content. Watching closely for the color reaction.

The color didn't change. It remained as bright green as it originally was.

"No parasite." Fishlegs whispered to Hiccup "who glanced at him with wide eyes, starting to get anxious.

"A-are you sure, Fishlegs?" Hiccup asked.

Fishlegs pouted, "Hiccup, didn't you see? The paste didn't change colors."

Hiccup glanced back at Gothi as he watched her do the same process with the red paste.

The paste remained red. It didn't change at all.

"No bacteria." Valka mumbled to herself. But Hiccup heard her.

His teeth soon found his lower lip "only one more test..." "He thought.

As he watched how Gothi repeated the process with the last test, his eyes moved up at Astrid. She was as calm as ever. As if she had been expecting all of this to happen soon enough. And she was expecting it to happen. She knew that if there was something threatening her health, then these paste-tests would point it out.

As Astrid watched Gothi stir the jar's content, her eyes narrowed. The color didn't change. Which only meant that there wasn't an invasion of virus, bacteria or parasite inside her.

The news were good. Yet, it only made way for her to get even more confused.

Gothi smiled to herself in satisfaction once she finished putting all her belongings back in the bag and nodded her farewells at Astrid before turning back to Valka, Fishlegs and Hiccup. All the mute Elder did, was shake her head at them. Denying any possibilities of a life-threatening disease.

Fishlegs sighed in relief, "Well, at least now we know she isn't gravely ill."

Hiccup's brows also matched Astrid's narrowed ones. He shook his head in disapproval, "Something's not right." His eyes began moving side to side, up and down. Looking at everything and nothing at the same time. His voice sounding like lost whispers, "There must be another kind of test that could be more accurate."

"Hiccup," Fishlegs called, "There is no test more accurate than the color-paste test."

As Fishlegs continued trying to convince Hiccup that there was nothing to feel concerned of, Valka silently walked away from them and disappeared into the shadows of the wide wooden columns.

Astrid soon walked to where Hiccup, Fishlegs and Gothi stood. Seeing how Gothi waved her hands in the air before digging her right hand in her right-side pocket and pulled out a fist full of charcoal dust. She opened her hand and watched the dust fall to the wooden floor in front of her and form a small mountain. Moving the staff in the charcoal dust, drawing medium sized triangles and a curvy line over them. She then pointed her long forefinger at Astrid.

"She says that there is no harm threatening Astrid's life," Fishlegs translated, "However, it seems that she has her insides a little sore. Perhaps because of the excess of exercise and lack of rest and good source of nutrients. She says, that warm liquids should make her feel better in no time."

"Well, that's a relief." Astrid chuckled. Crossing her arms over her chest and shifting her weight on her right hip. "â€"And it kinda makes sense too." Shrugs.

Fishlegs rose his right forefinger, as if hushing, "Wait, there is more." He said.

"More?" Hiccup's eyes darted at Fishlegs, "What do you mean by more?"

Fishlegs stayed silent. Watching how Gothi drew a big circle and three vertical lines inside. "She wants to speak to you Astrid!" He looks up at Astrid, "In private."

"Me?" Astrid asked, raising a brow. "Uh, sure, I'll take her home then."

Gothi quickly shook her head.

"No," Fishlegs said.

Gothi untied a small pouch from her right hip and poured down its contents which was white sand over the charcoal dust. Gothi then drew a group of mountains, followed by two arrows pointing upwards. Then, she drew an eye.

"She says she wants you to visit her hut, later tonight." Fishlegs said.

Both, Hiccup and Astrid shared a dumbfounded glance before looking back down at Gothi, who was now turning to face them.

SUWAP! Fine wood bounced against Astrid's head.

Groaning and bringing a hand up to rub against the slightly aching spot, Astrid's left eye opened. Only to see Gothi's eyes proudly shut closed and a satisfied smile across her lips as she hugged her staff close.

"What was that for?!" Astrid whined.

Gothi quickly sent the young Viking-lady a tight frown.

"She says, 'you deserve it for not coming to me when you should have.'" Fishlegs translated, then shrug one shoulder, "Well, she has a point, you know?"

Astrid sent him a nasty glare. Which only made him gasp and avert his eyes elsewhere. "Ah-uh, never mind what I said!"

Gothi then bowed her head and then started to walk away.

Knowing that it wasn't the best idea to disobey the Elder's will, both Hiccup and Astrid just watched her leave the Great Hall. Thinking of all the possible explanations that there were to Gothi's desire of speaking alone to Astrid. Though they didn't spend much time allowing their thoughts take over for a while when a loud, cheerful voice caught their attention

"Ah, Hiccup boy!"

Astrid and Hiccup turned around to find Souzbog and Matlus approach them. Both chiefs had an enthusiastic expression tattooed on their faces.

Hiccup took in a deep breath, resting his palm on Astrid's lower back. "Good morning. Chief Matlus, chief Souzbog."

Feeling his palm making contact with her body, Hiccup's slightly trembling fingers made Astrid realize how uneasy he felt about

introducing her to their guests of honor. Probably because last time he did so, things didn't turn out the way they all expected them to. Her hand soon found his sides and then her fingers crawled up his back. Patting him gently, "Relax, Hiccup." She whispered.

His eyes found hers as soon as her voice dug into his ears. His lips parted to spread a reply, but something else caught his attention and blew his unspoken words away. There was something in the deep-blue color of her eyes that seemed different. Those two unique gems he have been secretly admiring and loving throughout the years, now seemed to have a special spark on the corner of her iris.

I must be seeing things. "Hiccup thought" Ah, great, now I've officially gone crazy.

"Oi, don't tell me this is the little girl Astrid! It cannot be!" Matlus pressed both palms against his broad belly, tapping his fingers on it. Feeling his insides tremble under the quick touch from his fingers. His eyes scanned the woman by Hiccup's side.

Astrid slightly bowed her head in courtesy, "Indeed, I am Astrid. Pleased to meet you and welcome to Berk."

Matlus clicked his tongue, "No need for so much formality, dear. I've been eagerly waiting to see you ever since I was told you were put in a shitty mess!"

"Hey, hold down yer horses, Matlus." Souzbog rested his hand on Matlus' shoulder, giving him a quick shake from behind. "You always go ahead of yourself."

Matlus snorted, "Nei' I do not, Souzbog!"

Hiccup chuckled, not really helping it as he watched the two chiefs. "Ha-hey, easy guys." Cold and slim fingers found his fingertips. As an automatic response, his hand caught hers and held it close against the side of his thigh. As if hiding them from the eyes of others.

Hiccup took in a deep breath. He faced the other two chiefs and said, "Chief Matlus, chief Souzbog, here I formally present to you one of our best skilled shield maidens, Astrid Hofferson" "ei, I mean, Astrid Haddock." He sent her a sheepish smile, which was cut off by the sudden feeling of his warm blood rushing back up to his cheeks when he saw her playfully pout at him, "not to forget mentioning, one of the most amazing dragon riders and well, my wife."

Astrid couldn't keep herself from chewing on her inner cheeks at the sound of Hiccup's introduction. Trying to swallow back down the urges to pinch on his thigh for being too detailed. Not to mention, a little too cheesy for her taste.

But, she also knew that his intentions were to make clear that she was not just a shield maiden, but his wife as well. Which was the complete opposite from how he introduced her last time, when Osch came to Berk for the first time and then suddenly began demanding Astrid's hand for his son. No, this time, Hiccup wanted to make sure things were far more than just clear between clans. He wouldn't let go of her not even if all the gold in the world was offered to him as an exchange.



The other two chiefs glanced at each other and then burst out laughing. "Aye, we get it boy. No one shall lay a nail on her now." Souzbog teased.

"I find that completely unnecessaryâ€¦" Fishlegs whispered to Astrid from behind her.

She nodded in response. Though she was still trying to hold back the desires to laugh as well. "What part?"

"The one about laughing about it." Fishlegs said.

"Aaah," Astrid breathed.

"...the possessive part, now, is quite adorable, if you ask me." Fishlegs added. Smirking up at her. Then quickly looking away and start to whistle a cheerful song when her head turned to his direction and a tight glare sent shivers down his spine.

Matlus cleared his throat and stepped forward, standing just a few feet from Astrid. "Wow, my, look at you." His eyes moved all over her frontal side, scanning her from head to toe, "No longer a little girl, ei?" His right hand slowly reached to her.

When his fingers had contact with the ends of her braid, Astrid's body instinctively reacted by backing one step.

Matlus immediately pulled his hand back and shook his head, realizing what he was doing. Invading a woman's personal space. And not just any woman, a shield-maiden's personal spaceâ€"no less.

"My apologies, my dear. I got lost in the memory." Matlus mumbled.

"What memory?" Astrid asked, raising a brow.

"Vincent." Matlus responded, "You take much after your father. I could almost see him through those bright eyes of yours."

She was taken aback by his words, which only made her grow even more curious, "You, remember my father?"

Matlus flicked his tongue, "What kind of question is that, ei?! Of course I remember dear old Vincent! He used ta visit Icso very frequently. He used ta talk a lot about you even when he brought you along."

All of this sounded far too strange for her. Little did Astrid remember about her own father since he died when she was still far too young and little did her mother ever mentioned him to her. She never dared ask Stoick about her father, because even though she was very fond of him, she could just never bring herself to ask him about her dead father. All these years, Astrid had grown with the lone memory of a blonde, buff man smiling down at her and cupping her little face in his big hand before closing his eyes and never opening them again.

Her silence only made Matlus snicker and grab the dark leather bag that hung from across his chest, "Which reminds meâ€¦" He began,

attracting Astrid's attention once again as he dug his hand in the bag and pulled out what seemed to be a beat-up, small stuffed doll. The doll, was about five point five inches tall, its skin was beige colored, blue-button eyes, the dress was made out of pale-blue felt, and it had yellow knitting yarn as the hair. "You left this behind on your last visit to Icso,"

Astrid's brows furrowed as she looked down at the doll. "This is \_not\_ mine."

"Ah, yes, it \_is\_." Matlus said, "You were only two when you carried this doll everywhere. Yer father once told me how yer mother never agreed with letting you keep it. So he used ta let you have it whenever she wasn't around."

Fishlegs sighed within, whispering still behind Hiccup and Astrid, "Why am I not surprised by hearing that?"

Hiccup heard him and tilted his head to the side, studying the doll that soon was placed in Astrid's hands. Watching how she held it, like she feared it would break anytime soon.

\_Astrid never had dolls before\_â€"Hiccup thoughtâ€"\_I remember. I always saw her outdoors, fighting trees with a crappy knife when we were kids...The first toy I knew of, was her axe.\_

Soon, Hiccup's chin was already over her shoulder. His lower lip hiding in his mouth. Wide eyes staring down at the doll in her hands.

She could feel his slow and hot breathings brushing against her neck, but her eyes never left the doll. "Howâ€|did you keep this doll, after all these years?" Her voice was cracking away. As if her vocal chords had been starting to betray her thanks to the struggle her thoughts had in trying to remember at least one day she had spent with this doll. But, remembering was too impossible. Her life had been filled with nonstop training and fighting over her family honor since her father died. There was no room for good memories, until the chances to spend some time with Hiccup and discover new things greeted her lifeâ€"and that was \_after\_ she was fifteen years old.

"Aye, lass." Matlus nodded, "I always prayed for the day I could bring this back to yeh."

"Heyâ€|" Hiccup whispered, pointing down at the doll's yellow hair. Noticing that it was braided and resting over the doll's left shoulder. "â€|She looks just like \_you,\_ Astrid."

When she least expected it, Hiccup had taken the doll from her hand and his lips widened. Showing a Cheshire-cat smile. "Aw, why look at it! She looks so adorable!"

Fishlegs glanced at Hiccupâ€"who had backed away from Astrid as soon as he felt her step forward.

Hiccup soon started to pace back and forth, keeping himself on the move as he admired every gentle detail from the doll. Keeping himself safe from any chances of her chasing him.

Fishelgs soon joined. Poking at the doll's cheek and then caressing its hair-ends, "You're right! It's like a mini Astrid!" He slightly pouts at the doll, "But, this one smiles more." His heels started bouncing against the floors. "Oh, oh, oh! She could even become the doll of your future daughters!"

"I-I \_know,\_ right!? That'd be great!" Hiccup seemed to be getting far too excitedâ€”and too lost in his own imagination which was now apparently being shared with Fishlegs when suddenly the doll was snatched from his hands and a terrifying glare from Astrid's face was sent at both of them as she pressed the doll close against her guts.

"Stop speaking nonsense, you two." She hurried, "\_No one\_ is having a child anytime soon." Her message was loud and clear enough for Hiccup's cheerful expression to flee away in such a quick second. His slumped shoulders andâ€”fakedâ€”sad face only made her release a loud chuckle and then look back down at the doll, "Sorry to destroy your hopes like that, guys."

Truth was, Astrid had believed that she was temporarily infertile from the moment she started taking SnowBell, back when she was eighteen years old. Her mother forced her to religiously drink it twice a day and even though she always got her monthly comings without any troubles, she always believed that after drinking it for so long, her reproductive system might already been well asleep. She knew it would take far longer than a day for her insides to adjust back to normal if she ever stopped taking SnowBellâ€”which she had promised Valka she would just a few hours ago. But chances to be with child, to Astrid, were really low.

At least, that was what she thoughtâ€”

Before anyone would continue babbling about Astrid's still clouded childhood, Astrid looked back up at the two chiefs before her, and said, "I heard that the telegrams we received a few months ago, weren't from neither one of you. Is that true?"

"Ah, yes it is, lass." Souzbog said, apologetically scratching the back of his head. "We never sent you anything."

"I have been looking over these letters Hiccup showed me earlier this morning," Matlus said, pulling out two letters from his back pocket and passing them to Astrid.

Astrid took a hold of both letters addressed to Hiccup. One was from the island of Icsa and the other from the island of Larlis. They were the first two requests to have a meeting and discuss matters of alliance. After these two letters were received, Astrid remembered that Hiccup wrote each chief another letter, warning the fact that Berkians enjoyed living with dragons.

Souzbog pulled a letter from his back pocket and offered it back to Hiccup, "I have also been looking over this one."

Astrid glanced at the letter in Hiccup's hand from the corner of her eye and noticed it was the one she was given in the middle of the meeting when the Hollibusians arrivedâ€”saying that neither clans Feyvor or Smorton were looking forward for a treaty with a tribe that enjoyed a dragon's company.

The open letter specifically said,

\_Dear Hiccup,\_

\_Our most sincere apologies for not warning you sooner, but according to ancient laws and traditions we cannot afford into risking our people's safety and trust by compelling them to bond with the kind of beasts we are so used to give in our lives destroying their mere existence. Heaviest feeling within my chest for not accepting a treaty between our two tribes and Berk. Best if we leave it as it is.\_

\_Signed; Clans Smorton & Feyvor.\_

"And?" Astrid pushed in.

"Well, that ain't a letter written by any of our hands." Souzbog said.

"Neither are \_those."\_ Matlus said, pointing at the two letters in Astrid's hands.

"Wait, I think I have an idea." Fishelgs took the letters from Astrid's hands and also from Hiccup's. Going to the nearest table and unfolding the three of them. Setting them one by the other from the oldest to the most recent. He pulled a notebook from his vest's inner pocket. His eyes frantically moved all around the place and when he spotted the pencil lying over the map Hiccup used for the gathering, he went over to it, grabbed the pencil and then walked back to them. Standing in front of Chief Souzbog, "Please, would you write a brief introduction of yourself?"

Souzbog didn't ask anything, he just nodded and took the notebook and pencil from the boy's hands. Going to the table and starting to write down on the notebook's left page. When he finished, he straightened his back and glanced back at Fishlegs.

"Now, Chief Matlus if he mayâ€¦" Fishlegs said.

Souzbog offered Matlus the pencil.

When Matlus finished writing on the notebook's right page, he straightened his back again and returned the pencil to Fishlegs.

"Thank you very much." Fishelgs' knuckles slowly pushed the notebook just a few inches below the other three letters. Shifting his gaze from one sheet to the other.

On the notebook's left page,

\_Souzbog the Bounchonbog, chief of clan Smorton and ruler of the island of Larlis.\_

On the notebook's right page,

\_Matlus the Squamous, chief of clan Feyvor and ruler of the island of Icso.\_

When Fishlegs' eyes looked over the pages not once, not twice, not three times, but four times, they widened and his body suddenly became frozen stiff.

"What is it, Fishlegs?" Hiccup asked, starting to walk up to him.

Sooner than he would ever imagine, Fishlegs managed to turn and face Hiccup. His entire expression was emotionless and pale.

"For Odin's sake boy, spit it out!" Souzbog exclaimed.

"Aaah, the chiefs are saying the truth, Hiccup!" Fishlegs blurted out.

"Uh, explain yourself." Hiccup said, "Does the handwriting match?"

"Tha-that's the point, Hiccup." Fishlegs said, "None of these three letters match with the writing-style in my notebook."

"What!?" Both Hiccup and Astrid exclaimed in unison,

"Er, told yeh so." Souzbog muttered, scratching on his sideburns.

"But how can it be?" Hiccup asked, going over to the table and studying the pages himself.

"This could only mean one thing, Hiccup." Fishlegs hurried, his fingers soon beginning to nervously play with one another, "Someone has been making us believe the Hollibusians were the only ones willing to accept a treaty."

"But, what would be the reasons as to do something like that?" Astrid muttered. "A-and who could be stupid enough to think we wouldn't find out sooner or later!?"

"Ei, someone who enjoys playing with fire that is!" Matlus hissed.

"I'm not sure, Astrid." Fishlegs said, glancing at her before walking to stand right in the middle of the four of them, "But whoever did this, has a strongâ€"probably dangerous reason behind it."

"Not just that," Hiccup frowned as he slowly traced his finger over the charcoal on the letters. He took the pencil lying on the notebook and carefully studied its details. Scratching his nail against the black tip and sides until it released enough dust to be rubbed against the fingertips of his thumb and middle finger.

Hiccup's eyes widened. Recognizing the coal from which the pencils used on the letters were made of.

Hiccup very well knew that each pencil was unique since they could only handcraft them. The Haddock boy had been handcrafting his own pencils for yearsâ€"ever since he realized how much he enjoyed studying and inventing new things. It was only natural for him to know every little detail of how to achieve the perfect pyrolysis in order to create this man-made wonder. "The pencil used for each of

the three letters, was the same one."

"What do you mean?" Astrid asked. Standing right behind him. "Hiccup, you can't determine such a conclusion by just looking and touching at some dust."

"I know that I'm not wrong," Hiccup mumbled to himself, "These letters were written by the same person and that person, used the same pencil to write them."

"How are you so certain?" Astrid asked,

"Astrid," Hiccup glanced back at her. "An artist may always recognize its own masterpiece."

"But, the coincidence cannot be that much, Hiccup." Fishlegs said. Standing by Hiccup's other side. "Pencils, as much as other kinds of supplies have been provided to us by Trader Johan for years. The possibilities of your conclusion to be right, doesn't make much sense."

"How can you even be confident enough to rely on a hypothesis like that, anyway?" Eret came in. Walking down the empty hall, scratching on the tip of his nose.

Where the hel did he come from?â€"Astrid thought. Staring up at the man that soon stood by Chief Matlu's left.â€" Did he listen to everything we said?

Then Eret added with a mocking snicker, "We are talking about Vikings, here. People that rather spend their days fighting each other than to think about dirt."

"You just cleared out your own doubt." Astrid looked back at Eret, "Whoever did this, didn't truly think of possibilities to be caught so easily."

"Whenever we have the chance to get supplies like these by traders, we usually take as much as we can." Hiccup added. "But I can very well tell what is made by my hands and what isn't. What seems so curious to me, is that out of all the pencils in Berk, why mine?"

"That means, that whoever is behind this, might be someone close to you, chief." Eret said.

Hiccup's eyes darted back up at Eret. Realizing the heaviness in the man's words. Indeed, for it to be this much of a coincidence, the culprit shouldn't be that far from them after all...just maybe.

"Ah-haha! Impressive!" Hiccup's body was suddenly lifted by Chief Souzbog's hands. Slightly shaking him, "That imp didn't think yeh would be smart enough to notice such a small detail, huh?" He asked. Setting him down on his feet and watching how the young chief tried to regain his balance.

"Seems like it." Hiccup said.

"No one would think something as small and insignificant as dust

would unlock a box full of surprises." Astrid said. Resting a hand on Hiccup's shoulder while the other had its knuckles on her hip, "Amuses me the thought that they still dare to underestimate you, Hiccup." Snickers, "They just don't seem to learn just yet."

Her humor made his lips form a weak smile up at her. But it didn't last enough. He glanced back at the rest, not really helping how his eyebrows slightly narrowed, "Keep your eyes wide open. Whoever did this, lives here." He glanced back at them, "On \_Berk\_."

\* \* \*

><p>After the private meeting with Matlus and Souzbog, Hiccup and Fishlegs locked themselves in Hiccup's little study at the Blacksmith Shop to confirm that Hiccup's hypothesis of the charcoal pencils used on all three letters was either positive or negative.<p>

They had already announced a feast that would celebrate not just the safe arrival of Chiefs Matlus and Souzbog, but also to celebrate the fact that they were now officially ready for anything that would come up in a near future. Of course, Vikings always had a reasonâ€"best said an excuseâ€"to drink mead, endlessly eat and dance all night long.

In the meantime, Astrid and Stormfly flew up to the town's highest peak where Gothi the Elder lived in.

When Astrid hopped down from Stormfly's back and landed on Gothi's front porch, she turned to glance up at her dragon and flicked her right forefinger upwards, "Wait out here, girl."

Stormfly squawked, moving her head up and down before flying up to the hut's rooftop. Standing on it and gazing at her surroundings.

Astrid watched her dragon for a while longer, then glanced around. Seeing how no one came out of the hut to receive her and how not even a single tunic hung from any of the clotheslines.

"Uh, Gothi?" She called, "It's me, Astrid. You wanted to see me, remember?"

No one answered.

Raises a brow, then sighs aloud while bringing a hand up her head. Absently rubbing on the spot where Gothi's staff had previously smacked against, "Look, I'm sorry for being irresponsible and negligent with myself. I know I should have come to you from day one, but hey, I'm here now, right? That should make things better!"

Seeing how not even her apologies served as some kind of code to make at least something happen in this deserted place, Astrid's arms slumped on her sides. Letting out an inner grumble, "â€|or notâ€|"

Her feet moved forward. Stopping right in front of the closed wooden door as she thoughtâ€"\_should she be asleep already?\_"

Astrid's eyes searched for the skies. Finding thousands of sparkling

dots adorning the black mantle that draped over them. When her eyes moved down at the horizon, she noticed that just a few inches from it, the skies were still a little lighter than the ones above her head.

\_But, it's too early for that. Right?\_â€”She thoughtâ€”\_the night is still young.\_

Her right hand soon moved forward. By the soft touch of knuckles and wood, the door creaked inwards.

"This is strange..." She mumbled as her head tilted to the left and her feet slowly moved onwards. "Fishlegs said to be here at night."

It was dark inside. Chances of tripping over something increased with every step she made.

By the looks of it, no one was home. She could even hear the not-so-unkind-wind blowing outside. Soon intruding in the house through the open door and windows. Caressing Astrid's cheeks.

On the edge of the rounded table by the door, there was a big stainless steel bowl with a yellow note stuck on its frontal edge.

She walked toward the table and took the note in her right hand. Seeing her name well written on one side, then turning it to find the back of it all blank.

In the bowl, there was a perfectly folded beige blanket, a glass bottle filled with yak-milk, and a water-filled canteen.

Behind the stainless steel bowl, there was a basket. With corn biscuits and rye bread wrapped up in a white cloth. There were also two dark-red apples, a medium sized jar of honey, and kaleâ€”lots of kale.

"Why would Gothi give this to me?" she mumbled the words, while absently running her fingers over the basket that apparently was meant for her to take home with her.

"It means she is sending her blessings to yeh,"

Turning around to face the voice that invaded the serene silence surrounding her, Astrid's hand unconsciously moved away from the basket and hid behind her back, "Gobber!"

"Aye, hello Astrid." Gobber greeted, holding a torch on his good hand and waving at her with his prosthetic-hook-hand. "Looking for Gothi, eh?"

"Well, yeah. She asked me to come by, but she's not here."

"And yeh won't be seeing any of her for a few more days, lass." Gobber said, entering the hut and glancing at the stainless steel bowl and basket full of goods Astrid had been looking at just a second ago.

"But, why would she even want me to come by if she's not going to be



here anyway?" Astrid asked.

"Hm, probably because she wanted you ta take that home and patiently wait for her return." Gobber explained, "It is tradition. The Elder must go into the woods to consult the gods of war and triumph. This happens before each battle. Didn't yer mother ever told you a tale like that?"

Astrid scoffed within, "She hardly even sang lullabies. How should I know?"

"Well, it is never too late ta learn something new, eh? Haha!" Gobber's laughing came to an abrupt stop when his eyes landed back down at the girl.

Pointing his prosthetic hook at her face, "What did you and Hiccup do\_ this time,\_ ei?"

"Huh!?"

Shakes his hook up and down, "Yeh two are always gettin' yer'selves into trouble. What kind of chaos did you cause this time ta make Gothi summon you ta her home?"

"What? Me!?" Slowly steps backwards as he steps forward, then slightly frowns, "Correction, Hiccup is the one who usually gets into trouble, not me. I always try to keep him out of trouble."

"Arg, that doesn't take away the fact that yeh two are accomplices either way!"

She couldn't stop herself from releasing soft chuckles, even as she tried to keep her face as serious as possible. But she failed at it. Gobber's accusations sounded far too familiar to her. Like how he used to scold her and Hiccup back then for flying off to the possible ends of the world until the sun hid behind the horizon and the moon took its place up in the sky.

"Aurm uh, but hey! Hasn't it ever occurred to you that maybe we did something good?"\_ She hurried in, "You know, for the good of our tribe? I mean, we did train some dragons into Titans in such a short period of time. A-and besides, you just said that when Gothi does this kind of thing, means that she is sending her blessings...or something like that. Right?"

Gobber's silence only made her feel a little uneasy as she watched how he wrinkled his nose and simply continue to walk forward. Soon, her back was against the wall. "Uh, Gobber?"

"Aye, seems like Gothi has spotted something to give out a blessing for." He said.

"But, what does all of this mean?" She asks.

Gobber points at the basket and stainless steel bowl, "I suggest yeh take all this home and wait for Gothi's return. When the Elder does something like this, it means she is sending her eternal blessings. She doesn't do this to just anyone, you know? No one knows the real reasons behind these kind of things, sometimes it is best to just be

patient and let the answers come to you one by one."

Astrid rose a brow at him. Seeing how now he turned on his heels and walked away from her, "Heh, probably because we've been through some weird stuff lately?"

"Hehe, yeah. She might feel sorry for yeh two."

Astrid rolled her eyes, shaking her head back and forth at his sarcasm. On his way out, he grabbed the stainless steel bowl and continued walking.

"Being serious now," He said, already standing on the entrance and turning to watch her take the basket from the table. "Yeh should be happy now. We have an advantage now in battle with two more tribes on our side, yeh and Hiccup finally tied the awkward knot and got married, and the sun is somehow slowly pushing itself out of its hideout."

Astrid's lips formed a faint smile. Trying to see their present time as Gobber did. With a more positive side to it. "Right, things will brighten up soon."

"They already are!" Gobber cheered, whistling up at Stormfly who jumped down from the hut's rooftop and landed on the front porch. He went up to the blue Deadly Nadder, opened the empty basket tied to the saddle and placed the bowl and its contents in. He stretched his hook out to Astrid.

She hung the basket's holder in his hook and watched how he tied it to the saddle. "Go now, lass. Take this home and then enjoy the feast! Enjoy the night with yer friends. When the right time comes, Gothi will find yeh."

Astrid climbed on Stormfly's back. By the time Astrid opened her mouth to say something else, Gobber tapped on Stormfly's sides, "Away with yeh two now!" Laughing as he watched how Stormfly quickly squawked and then jumped from the Elder's hut.

Gliding down, Astrid bit on the lowest of her lip. Leaning down and rubbing on Stormfly's sides, "Hey girl, what do you say if we go have something to eat first? We can take these home later. Right?"

"Sqawk! Sqawk!" Stormfly responded. Moving her head up and down as she turned her flying course to the Great Hall.

Laughing at her reaction, Astrid continued rubbing on her dragon's scales for a while longer, "Yeah, I agree. Neither of us has eaten all day long. Maybe some broth for me and a basket full of delicious chicken drumsticks for you will do the trick, huh?"

\* \* \*

><p><em>Flickâ€|Clank!<em>

The deadbolt was pushed backwards and the door creaked open.

A well-polished knife's blade slowly moved out of the Haddock's home door lock and heavy steps entered the empty house. Walking directly

to the dining table, where there lied a basket with a white cloth that covered its contents.

A big hand, hidden under the warmth of a black-leather glove removed the cloth. Exposing a variety of herbs, an empty mug and a small jar of brown sugar.

The hand took the jar of brown sugar while the other gloved hand replaced it with another jar of the same size and with a brown-crystalized dust inside that seemed like brown sugar itself.

Deep, inner giggles emitted from the shadow that entered the Haddock home as the white cloth was draped once again over the basket's contents and then heavy feet slowly stepped backwards.

The figure didn't wait any longer to abandon the Haddock home the same silent way it entered it. Being its deep and mysterious giggles be the last thing released from the figure before closing the door and disappearing into the woods nearby.

## 18. Rain of Stars

Landing by the two large "half closed" doors of the Great Hall, Astrid hopped from Stormfly's back. Gently brushing her left palm over the Deadly Nadder's scales until reaching her massive chin.

The dragon's head slightly twitched by the vivid sound of drums, flutes and strings coming from the Great Hall's insides. Making Astrid release a dear chuckle at her and caress her even more. "Sounds like they already started the party. Wait for me here while I sneak some delicious stuffed chicken out for you, okay?"

"Gwaaan?" Stormfly tilted her head to the side, then glanced back over her shoulder to find a Night Fury happily climbing up the steps.

"Toothless?" Astrid asked. Seeing how the Night Fury faced the Deadly Nadder and then moved his head close against hers. Shifting her shoulders and raising a brow at the two of them, Astrid brought her hand up to her chin and slightly scratched it before saying, "So, I guess no chicken tonight?"

Toothless let out a cheerful growl. Starting to climb down the steps. He stopped halfway down, turned to the girl's direction and beckoned for Stormfly to follow him.

Stormfly didn't hesitate in stomping down the steps after him.

Watching them, "Heh no chicken then." confirms between mutters, then yells out to them, "See you guys later!" Waves, turns on her heels and pushes the left door open.

As she walked in, Astrid couldn't resist herself from gazing at everything that surrounded her in fair amazement. The Great Hall had been decorated with cords of lanterns across the ceiling. Every table was filled with loads of beautiful dishes. To her right, she passed by a table that had a roasted turkey in the center, surrounded by a

rich variety of colorful fruits and vegetables. To her left, she passed by a table full of foreign kinds of sweets and desserts.

Cakes, bon-bons, cinnamon-sweet rolls, colorful macaroons, oatmeal cookies, fudge bites, pound cakes, pies, poppy seed muffins, chocolate crackles, pudding, tartsâ€”you name it!

Food that was never even seen on Berk before. In all honesty, Berkians could only bake limited kinds of sweets due to their harvesting limitations. The importing of goods wasn't as frequent as one could hope for since Berk was located at a really far-north region while the big continents were a lot more to the south. The all-year-long-icy-or-simply-too coldâ€”waters didn't make the job any easier.

"Wow!" Astrid exhaled. Standing on her toes as soon as she saw a wench holding a platter on one palm, dancing her way to her direction. Allowing her body sway spirally once the wench passes by her, Astrid's eyes peeked over the tray and her hand quickly picked what seemed like a smallâ€”almostâ€”violet ball that looked a lot like a berry. She sniffed the strange thing in her hand and then popped it into her mouth.

A magnificent rush of sweetness exploded in her mouth and her shoulders gave in a quick shake. "Mmm, wow!" Tasted like the berry was coated in some kind of glazed honeyâ€”or something like that. The point? It was delicious!

"This is incredible!" Fishlegs' voice soon became louder as her feet took her closer to their usual table. "It's like an opportunity of a lifetime!"

Ruffnut, was messing with Tuffnut's pork strips while her brother jumped and awkwardly swayed in the dance floorâ€”trying helplessly to get a girl hold his hand while it.

Snotlout, was far too focused in his pork ribs to even pay any attention to Fishlegs's constantâ€”and very much enthusiasticâ€”babbling.

Chief Souzbog and Chief Matlus, were also at the dance floor. Both chiefs dancing and enjoying themselves with random wenches.

Gobber, soon joined Tuffnut. Hooking his good arm with the male twin and then skipping in circles while waving his prosthetic-hand-mug in the air.

Hiccup, seemed to be the only one sharing Fishlegs' enthusiasm at the table as he attentively listened to his friend speak. "It is an opportunity of a lifetime." confirms, "Not every day we may enjoy a feast like this one."

"Right!" Fishlegs said, "Just, look at all this! The Great Hall is even more crowded than ever and it looks like there is enough food to feed an entire continent!"

"And all thanks to an alliance." Hiccup rose his mug to Fishlegsâ€”who rose his tooâ€”and both mugs slightly crashed their tips.

"I can't believe these two chiefs were generous enough to bring so much, just to stay on our good side." Astrid said. Pulling back the chair by Hiccup's right.

Out of habit, Hiccup slightly stood from his seat. Welcoming her with a quick nod and a benevolent smile until she took her seat.

"How was your meeting with Gothi?" Hiccup asked her, seeing how she leaned more to him and inspected the contents on his plate.

Roasted Brussels Sprouts with bacon bits and red potato salad with radish. That, was Hiccup's dinner.

Biting on her lower lip, hypnotized by the tempting beauty in his plate, Astrid's fingers soon found their way to Hiccup's plate and picked a Brussels Sprout. "It wasâ€|uhâ€|interesting?" She answered, "She wasn't there." eats the edible bud.

"What do you mean, \_she wasn't there\_?" Hiccup rose a brow. "Fishlegs said she wanted to see you in private."

Astrid nods, picking another bud and then eats it. "She \_does.\_ But when I got there, she had a bowl and basket of supplies and goods for me to take home. Few minutes later, Gobber came in and said that Gothi left to the mountains in the wilderness to meditate and communicate with the godsâ€|or something like that."

"Oh, oh, oh! That's right!" Fishlegs rushed in, "Old legends say that the chosen Elder of every tribe, must keep frequent communication with the gods. He or she, is to be the closest with the spirits that guard our every step. Before every battle or war, the elder must present the upcoming event to the gods of war and then receive some sort of revelation. This also happens not only before a war, but also, on a very significant occasion."

"A significant occasion? Like what?" Hiccup's eyes sparkled with intrigue.

"Like, when a chief is about to have a child." Fishlegs responded. This time, Astrid's eyes moved from Hiccup's food, to their friend. Gifting him her full attention as her chewing on the food became a lot slower by the second.

"The chosen Elder, presents the child's future to Nanna, Frigga and Freya before it is even born." Fishlegs continues, "According to those old legends, Nanna, is asked for streams of peace and joy in the child's life as it grows older. Gifting the baby a touch of natural happiness. Freya, is asked for abundant love and fertility for the child's mother and father. Last but not least, Frigga. The prayer directed to Frigga is by far, \_the most important one\_."

"Why is that?" Astrid asks. Finally swallowing.

"Because, Frigga's prayer is mostly meant for the mother. The Elder, personally asks Frigga for protection throughout the hard months of pregnancy. Since many women have either lost their child or their own lives in childbirth, the Elder respectfully asks the goddess of marriage and motherhood to protect the chief's wife and their child during those months. When the chief's wife is about to give birth,

the Elder sends Frigga one last prayer. To gift the mother the strengths she needs to bring this child to our world and survive afterwards." Fishlegs explained.

"Sounds scary," Astrid's words escaped her lips. By the time she realized she had spoken her thoughts out loud, a quick gag followed and then her attention was brought back down to Hiccup's plate. "I-I meanâ€¦|\_complicated." \_

"It \_is\_ complicated." Fishlegs confirmed. "Oh, but all worth it. This can also happen whenever the chief gets gravely ill or when a tribe needs to make an alliance with other tribes. All with the same purpose of getting a direct blessing from the gods."

"Do you really believe those stories are even true?" Hiccup asks, seeing now how Astrid took his fork and started to pick on his red potato salad. "And uhâ€¦|hey, Astrid? Would you like me to get you \_your own\_ plate?" Slightly frowns down at her, "And besides, Gothi said \_warm liquids\_. Remember?"

"Mmm, no thank you." Astrid moans while chewing.

"At this rate, I won't get to eat anything." Hiccup snickers, "There's a lot of red potato salad on this table. Why are you taking mine?"

"Becauseâ€¦|" chews, "â€¦|mmmâ€¦|" swallows and looks up at him, pointing the fork's teeth at him, "The one someone else has always looks and tastes even tastier."

Hiccup pouts down at her. She just shrugs innocently in response and pulls his plate closer so she could continue eating.

"She's right, you know?" Fishlegs teased.

Hiccup mockingly rolled his eyes and pushed his seat backwards. Standing up, "I'll get her what Gothi said she \_should\_ be eating in order to heal whatever strange thing that's going on in her."

"The older he gets, the more he reminds me of his father." Astrid mutters. Knowing that Hiccup could be a bossy leader at times and a worrywart at other times. Not that she was complaining, though. She loved that part of himâ€¦"actually.

Astrid glanced over her shoulder once again. Spotting Hiccup by a table with various pots. His back was to her. He leaned forward and while holding a dish in one hand, he stirred the pot's contents with the other.

Her body turned straight again. As she slowly chewed on the remains in her mouth, her eyes found the red potatoes with radish on a separate dish by Fishlegs' right. Instead of asking her friend to pass on the red potatoes, she stood on her feet, grabbed Hiccup's plate and then walked over to where the red potatoes were.

All the while, Fishlegs watched her with a brow raised. "Uh, Astrid? What are you doing? If I may know, of course."

"Serving." Astrid responded. Grabbing the big metallic spoon dug in the potatoes' dish and serving some into the plate. "Where are the

Brussels Sprouts?"

"Um," Fishlegs points at a smaller dish filled with Brussels Sprouts, located near the table's center. \_"â€|there?"\_

Astrid followed his finger and then leaned forward. Pulling the Brussels Sprouts closer and then serving a few buds into Hiccup's plate.

"You know, you could have just asked me to pass on the potatoes and buds." Fishlegs said.

"I know." She answered.

"So, why didn't you?" Fishlegs asks.

"Because I wanted to serve him myself." Astrid simply responded. Walking back to her seat at the exact same time Hiccup reached his seat.

They both stared at each other for a few seconds. As if frozen in time when Astrid showed him a sheepish smile and then set the plate on the table. "I refilled your plate." She said,

"Really?!" Hiccup looks down at his plate. Smiling big, "Thanks, Astrid." Sets the dish he had been holding in front of her and offers her a spoon. "For you, my lady."

When Astrid's eyes fell to the contents of the dish Hiccup just brought for her, she couldn't help the urges to take the spoon from him, sit down, and start stirring the soup. "Chicken broth and fresh vegetables. Mmm, thank you, Chief."

"Why, you are welcome." Hiccup playfully bows at her, takes his seat then laughs it away.

Soon, both of them started to enjoy their meal. Innocently stealing some gazes at each other every once in a while. Astrid's left handâ€"which was the free hand that rested on her thigh as she ateâ€"slowly moved to find Hiccup's thigh. He flinched. But then his muscles relaxed at the unexpected feeling of her cold fingers sending shivers through his skin.

His eyes moved to find her. But she was enjoying her meal. So much, that she barely even noticed how his ears were already slightly red and his cheeks felt like they were boiling. He wanted to take her hand in his. To hold her until dawn. So he slowly moved his left hand over his thighs and found her hand. The tip of his fingers trapped hers and as a reaction, Astrid's face turned to him.

All he could do, was flash her a smile.

Astrid tilted her head to the side and smirked up at him, "Hey, I have an idea." Whispers for only him to hear.

Hiccup ducked his head closer. As to try and listen to her despite all the noise around them.

"Would you like to disappear for a few hours?" She asks.

"What, you mean, \_leave?"\_ Hiccup asks.

Astrid nods.

He didn't say more. He straightened his back and looked at their surroundings. Noticing that Ruffnut, Snotlout and Fishlegs weren't at the table anymore. Not really interested in finding out where the gang was at for the moment, Hiccup stood from his chair.

Still holding his hand, Astrid stood from her seat as well.

In silence, the couple walked through the crowd and made it out of the Great Hall without anyone stopping them—surprisingly.

\* \* \*

><p>Over the mountaintops, beneath the sparkling sheet of stars, through the dense white clouds, dragon wings pierced the air.<p>

Their little disappearing-mission took them to find their dragons at the nearest feeding station. Where they silently hopped on their backs and simply allowed the wind to push them away.

It's been a while since they went for a flight together. Well, for a \_real\_ flight at all. One that would allow them to enjoy every second of it. Without having to think of all the responsibilities that now followed them not just as adults, but also as a couple and head of an entire tribe.

Astrid spread her arms up in the air as Stormfly flew higher. The cold breeze against her skin felt wonderful. When her eyes opened once again, long strips of colorful beauty spread across their sky. Slowly dancing and shifting from a light green to dark blue. From dark blue, to light green. So and so.

Hearing the Night Fury's call, she glanced down and spotted Toothless flying a little lower than Stormfly. Hiccup was staring up at her. Waving.

Astrid didn't wave back. Instead, she carefully stood on Stormfly's back. By the sudden look of confusion on Hiccup's face, Astrid released a mischievous giggle and then jumped from Stormfly's back, landing on Toothless'.

With both hands steady on Hiccup's shoulders, she fixed her posture on the saddle.

"Why, welcome aboard young lady!" Hiccup teases.

"Heh," Astrid's hands slid down his arms and found his sides. Wrapping him in an embrace as her head tilted upward to admire the Northern Lights that gracefully danced above them.

Toothless made a left turn. Then pushed himself even higher away from the clouds and closer to the Lights.

And it \_did\_ feel like they were getting closer to the lights. Even though they knew that they wouldn't actually get any closer, they were all pleased enough to let their thoughts believe that they could



touch the stars from a dragon's back.

Astrid moved her left hand and stretched it up to the sky. As if trying to grasp the dancing lights. Hiccup watched her, but a sudden ray of light caught his attention.

His eyes fell on her golden ring. As she waved her hand on the air, the Northern Light's light reflected on Astrid's wedding ring. The same ring he made for her. The same ring he had spent sleepless nights trying to make every detail seem perfect. And it was perfect. It looked perfect in her hand and it definitely looked perfect now that it was shining right before his eyes.

Hiccup's fingers crawled up her arm. Eventually, the back of his hand met her palm. Even though the position they were in didn't allow them to lace their fingers together, their wedding rings did touch. Now sparkling together against the lights that gave life to the pitch black sky that was meant to show itself to humanity every evening.

Together, their hands came down. Astrid's fingers intertwined with his this time. Hiccup brought their hands up to his lips, brushed his chapped lips over the back of her hand, then planted a soft kiss.

Feeling him, Astrid's head laid on his shoulder. Letting her eyes get numb at the nice moment they were both experiencing together.

As if trapped in a shower of endless falling stars, the sky above them kissed their hearts and embraced them with its natural splendor.

Many things have happened in the past few months. Many more have happened in the past few years. Who knows what the future holds for them? Who knows, if their future will be cloudy, or rainy? No one knows. But one thing was clear, Hiccup and Astrid sure knew how to find their way back to happiness. They have done it countless times in the past. With a love as pure and strong as theirs, there was no way in Hel they would allow Loki play eternal pranks on them.

"Squawk! Squawk!" Stormfly's calls made Astrid glance up at her dragon. Then looking up ahead, noticing that they were approaching a rather familiar island with orange, dark yellow and reddish trees and a few pine trees. The clouds formed a ring around the island.

"Baldr?" Astrid asked in a soft whisper.

Hiccup looked up ahead and spotted the island. Releasing a quick chuckle, he petted Toothless' side with his free hand, "You brought us to Baldr?!"

"Grroouunn!" Toothless moved his eyes as to try and see Hiccup on his back. Showing his gums.

"Seems like they were also planning on spending a while just the four of us." Astrid says, "Like old times."

"Heheh, not bad." Hiccup says.

Several minutes later, the four of them had found the perfect spot to spend a while and just enjoy the evening together. They gathered a few stones and logs which Toothless joyously spat plasma into them so they'd lit up.

The dragons were laying by the fire. Toothless' numb eyes got lost in the flames while Stormfly curiously tilted her head at the stars above her.

Hiccup and Astrid were sitting at the other side of the fire. Opposite to the dragons. Her back was against his.

The basket full of goods Gothi had prepared for her was by their side. Hiccup was peeling one of the apples with the knife he keeps on his forearm-pocket while Astrid held her right knee close to her chest and her eyes got lost in the distance.

"This place," Hiccup speaks, "Holds a lot of memories." Pushes apple skin off the blade with his thumb, then lets go a deep sigh as he lifts his gaze to the skies, "Deep conversations, arguments, shared enthusiasmâ€\_secretsâ€|"\_ Looks back down at the half-peeled apple. As if in deep thought. "Here I asked you to marry me."

He heard a slight inner giggle from her. But she didn't say anything.

Hiccup bites his lip. Looks up at the stars, "I didn't come back here after that day. To be honest, I even forgot how good it felt to be here in Baldr."

"I used to come quite often. With Stormfly." She says. "Baldr, has always felt like a cave of memories and good feelings to me. Whenever I came, as soon as I touched the ground, I would remember something different. But, the memory that came to me the most, was \_that\_ one you just mentioned. After things got really hard for all of us, losing the chiefâ€"

Hearing her, Hiccup lowers his head. Feeling knives across his chest as he listened,

"â€having to work even harder than what we were already used to so our village would recover from so much damage, false rumors starting to spread, outsiders trying to reign over our future, \_liesâ€|"\_ pauses, "â€I used to get really angry quite often. It almost felt as if someone was toying with my long-tamed temper. Coming to Baldr, made me think on all the good things that actually matter. Bringing a drop of peace into the raging waters." Releases a smile, "Feels nice."

Hiccup nods, "Yes. Feels like this place embraces us. Though, we never visited Baldr with the rest of the gang."

"No. Baldr is, \_ just ours."\_ Astrid says.

"We've \_made it\_ ours." Hiccup ads.

Astrid clicks her tongue, "Right."

Hiccup stabs the knife into a slice and plucks it out of the rest of

the fruit. Tilts his hand backwards, offering her the slice. When the corner of Astrid's eye caught the apple slice, she tilted her head to take a better look at it. Her hand pulled the slice from the blade and Hiccup's hand drew the knife back to his sight. Continuing to peel the rest of the apple.

"To be honest," He speaks, "I never really pictured myself like this. When I was a kid, the only thought that occupied my mind was to kill a dragon and get myself a girlfriend so that people would stop looking at me like I was just some kind of mistake." Until Toothless came in, and I could see the world from a clearer perspective." A small smile escapes his lips, "Then we all got to explore beyond our surroundings." Shrugs, "The least I thought of, was to become the chief and get married."

His long silence after his last sentence, made her turn her head to the side. As if to see at least the back of his shoulder. "We've learned a lot of things, Hiccup." pauses, "When we were kids, we wanted to follow our parents' footsteps and join battle against dragons. Then we grew a little older and learned a lot from them. So much, that we ended up welcoming them into our lives. As years went by, we experienced all kinds of things. Like, stubbornness, anger, jealousy, ignorance, joy—and then, all of the sudden, we became adults. Forced to face responsibilities that we didn't even know were listed for us. But, in the end, it all was for the better."

Hiccup nods, "Seems like it. We \_learn.\_"

"Yes, as we grow older."

Astrid's left hand slid from her thigh and touched the ground. Slowly moving against the softness of grass until her fingertips met with the fingertips of his hand.

His fingers slightly rose at the sudden feeling of her touch. But then, they moved to rest over hers.

Only the sound of the breeze and fire was heard. The gentle touch of their hands practically said all that was needed in order to understand that their hearts felt the same way. He was precious to \_her,\_ and she was precious to \_him.\_ Perhaps, they never really allowed themselves to say it out loud to one another so boldly. Yet, being at Baldr, seemed to have brought that kind of comfortable atmosphere that actually drew the words and feelings out on their own.

It could almost feel like Baldr possessed some kind of magic in it—or was it just the countless times Hiccup and Astrid had visited the island in the past? Making the island become doubtlessly special?

Then, her chest felt tight. Unwelcome images in her head suddenly took place. Being an adult and learning new things on the way, also included going through terrible moments. Thinking about such, made Astrid remember the main reason as to why she was now sitting on the ground, under a beautiful sky full of stars, and having her back against Hiccup's.

If it weren't for him, she wouldn't even be there right now. Only Odin knows where she'd be. Something inside her, dared to grasp her

heart and squeeze it until it screamed for freedom. The air felt like it wasn't meant for her to enjoy for a slight second.

Hiccup's fingers moved side to side over hers. He then turned on his side, taking a better hold of her hand and then stood on his feet. Letting the knife and apple roll from his thigh and fall to the ground as he stood. He offered her his other hand.

Perplexed, looking up at him, Astrid's hand slowly moved up to meet his.

Pulling her up on her feet, his eyes found hers. The fire reflected on her eyeballs as he took small steps backwards. Intertwining their fingers together and then standing still. After few seconds of just standing by the fire, his right foot moved forward and his body closer to hers. Their hands brought to their chest-level, then his body drew back and their joined hands fell to their hip-level. His right foot moved to the side, left foot following. Having her feet soon follow his rhythm.

His left hand let go of hers only to give her a slow spin with his other hand and then have her back lean against his chest. Left hand meeting her fingertips once again on her chest-level.

Letting go and turning to face one another, Hiccup's left hand rested on the small of her back, drawing her closer.

The toes of her right foot tipped behind his prosthetic foot and then her body gracefully pulled away from his. Circling in unison once before moving their chests forward and then away.

Soon, his right hand rested on her back and pulled her closer once again. This time, her left hand climbed over his shoulder and her head leaned to lay over it while their other hands stayed laced together. Their bodies now slowly moving side to side, back and forth. "I knew we would dance again, \_like this\_." He whispers in her ear. "Served me right to forbid you to leave Berk back then." Teases her.

Her eyes closed. Lungs taking in the hot scent of burnt coal from his flight suit. "Do you know what set me free from that kind of fate?"

Hiccup shakes his head, "What?"

Pulls head back to look up at him, "Your habit of not giving up."

Hiccup's eyes blinked in surprise at the sound of her calm words.

Without letting him answer, she halted their slow dancing and then stood on her toes. Brushing her lips against the thin line of rough-short hair across his jawline, planting a soft kiss, "Out of all the amazing qualities that you possess, being persistent is one of the best ones that makes you \_who you are.\_"

Hearing her only made his heart race. His eyes met hers. Wrapped up in a gentle breeze, under a sky full of stars and the slow dancing of the Northern Lights, their lips locked together.

For a magical moment, all kinds of worries disappeared from their knowledge. Their lips devoured one another, refusing to let go of the wonderful feeling that filled their chests.

Hours passed by. Soon, the sun was peeking from the horizon. Saluting the white clouds that were meant to meet him up high. At Baldr, the fire had already faded away and there were only small remains of wood and ashes left.

By the extinguished fire, cocooned in a big beige blanket, Hiccup and Astrid dreamed.

Astrid was laying on her side. Hiccup laid on his side as well. His arm draped over her as he embraced her from behind. The blanket reached over his nose. The wind howling around them and a sudden touch of icy air on his brows made his eyes open. Seeing how tiny snowflakes gracefully fell from the sky.

He glanced over his shoulder. Seeing Stormfly and Toothless already wide awake and running each other around the place.

Turning his head to look back down at Astrid, he notices that the blanket practically covered most of her face. Only half of her forehead could be seen. He slowly pulled the blanket down until her face was revealed.

Her head rested over her arm and her lips were slightly parted.

Watching her breathe, admiring each rise and fall of her chest. His eyes then explored her sides, thighs, legs and back up. Absently, his hand slid up her hip and down over the lowest of her abdomen. Pulling her closer against him and then leaning his head down so his lips would make gentle contact with the skin of her reddened cheeks.

Her face moved and her lips found his own. Catching him off guard even though he knew his constant touching on her would eventually wake her up.

His lips encased her lower one. Feeling how her head moved to release her arm from under it and soon her fingers crawled up his neck, jawline, and then rested on his cheek.

Not pulling his face any closer for a deeper kiss, but she didn't push it away either. No. She kept her lips still beneath his own and her fingertips froze on the skin of his cheek. Letting his lips dance over hers ever so delicately.

"How are you this morning?" Whispers against her lips. Then pulling slightly away to meet her eyes. Which slowly opened when their lips broke apart.

Her faint smile replaced words. The fingers on his cheek brought him back down to her. Their foreheads touched and their warm breaths tickled their noses and chins.

Toothless and Stormfly walked up to their riders. Toothless stood right in front of them and tilted his head to the side in curiosity at them. When he finally realized what his eyes were seeing, his gums

showed up.

Hiccup didn't need to look up to see his best friend's body near them. His shadow was big enough to cover the sun for them from their angle. Hearing his dragon's low growls and knowing what they meant, Hiccup took in a deep breath, "I know, I'm coming." mumbles. Making Toothless shrug both shoulders and go back to Stormfly.

"Time to go." Hiccup whispers down to Astrid. Who only nodded in response.

He pulled away from her and stood on his feet. Offering her his hand. She took it and allowed him to pull her back up.

Her hands quickly moved to dust his shoulders and arm while he rubbed his knuckles against his eyes.

"We lost track of time and fell asleep." Astrid said. Pulling back and kneeling to grab the blanket from the ground. Folding it. "People must have already noticed that we're missing."

Hiccup nods, "But it was nice." Walks back to Toothless and mounts him.

"Yup." She says, going back to Stormfly, pushing the blanket back in the saddle's basket and then climbing on her back. "I'll be guarding today."

"Okay, I'll be at the forge helping Gobber and Snotlout with the new weapons." He said.

She grins, "Race home?"

Hiccup pouts playfully at her, "You know Stormfly can't beat Toothless' magnificent speed."

Astrid's shoulders shifted, "I wouldn't be so sure about that now." Rubs Stormfly's side, "Stormfly is a Titan now. Remember?"

Hiccup chuckles, "Well, would you like to test her speed now against Toothless'?"

"Challenge accepted, chief." Teases, pets Stormfly and takes off in no time.

"Hey!" Hiccup yells back at her, "That's cheating!" Leans forward and pets Toothless, "Okay bud, since they think cheating would give them some advantages, let's show them otherwise."

Toothless growls happily, shaking his head in enthusiasm before frowning determinedly at the girls already in the air and soon took off behind them.

\* \* \*

><p>Few days later, Gobber found Astrid walking down the road with Stormily by her side and told her that Gothi had returned and was waiting for her at her hut. Without giving it a second thought, Astrid hopped on Stormfly's back and flew straight up to Gothi's hut. Hoping that this time, the Elder truly was expecting

her.<p>

"Gothi?" She called, hopping down from Stormfly's back.

Astrid turned back at Stormfly, who now stood at the edges of Gothi's front porch. Astrid shrugged her shoulder at her dragon and then turned back at the hut's door. "Uh, Gothi?"

When her knuckles reached for the door, the door suddenly opened inwards and the Elder smiled bright up at the girl.

"Gothi!" Astrid exclaimed. Surprised herself for seeing the elder since she had started believing that the woman wasn't going to show up again. "You're back!"

Gothi nods. Moving aside to make way for Astrid.

Astrid walked in and sat on the nearest chair by the entrance. "So, what do you need me for?"

Gothi stands in front of her and eyed her from head to toe before going over to a piece of cardboard on the floor filled with sand.

By the time Astrid stood behind the Elder to peek on what she was doing, Gothi was already drawing three vertical lines on the sand.

"Um," reads the question, "Yes, I've been feeling a lot better. Hiccup and Valka make sure I get lots of warm fluids like yak milk and broth." Looks at the woman, "I even feel a lot stronger now."

Gothi smiles. Nodding her head once, then bending down to brush her palm on the sand. Erasing the previous symbol before she would write more. She looked up at Astrid and waved her staff at her so she could have the Viking girl's full attention. When she did, Gothi pointed her right forefinger at Astrid's face, then touched her own eye. As if asking Astrid to read carefully what she was about to tell her.

Astrid just nodded. Eager to know what the wise Elder had in store for her.

When Gothi began drawing on sand once again, Astrid noticed that the first symbol she drew, was a triskelion. A pattern consisting of three bent lines that came out of the symbol's center. This symbol, meant motion. It could also mean change. Depending on the context in which it is presented.

Under the triskelion, Gothi drew a circle. By that same circle, she drew another circle with a vertical line right in its center.

Under these three symbols, on the center, Gothi drew two X's, one over the other. Their ends connected.

"Change. Light. Moon. Fertility. Hmm," Mumbles the meaning of each of the symbols on the sand.

Gothi pointed her finger at Astrid's lower abdomen. Making the young Viking gaze down at the Elder.

Gothi was showing Astrid a warm smile. Her finger pointed back down at the last symbol she drew and then slowly brought her hand back up to Astrid's body. Gently resting her palm and long fingers on the shield-maiden's lower abdomen.

Shivers ran down Astrid's spine at the feeling of Gothi's touch and the meaning of those symbols on the ground. "But, what? Gothiâ€|that'sâ€|noâ€|" Shakes her head, "I can'tâ€|I don'tâ€|\_whatâ€|?"\_ Shocked, she didn't even know how to put into words the mess that was going on in her head.

Understanding her shock, Gothi just nodded in confirmation. Making Astrid's eyes widen in recognition, letting all the mixed emotions rain down on her and have her lips part enough to show her teeth in a wide smile. "I-I-I have to tell Hiccup," Mumbles to herself.

Faster than she could even plan to, Astrid was already dashing out of Gothi's house, climbing on Stormfly's back and leaning forward on her, "Come on girl. Let's go find Hiccup. Fast!"

Stormfly gawked and jumped from Gothi's porch. Gliding down towards the Blacksmith Shop.

\_What, me? with child!?!\_â€"she thought. Not even believing the words herself.

Clearly, Astrid never really agreed with the fact of having a child in the middle of such troublesome times. But receiving the unexpected news felt far too wonderful to even think of all the things that made her back-down on the idea of ever becoming a mother. Now it all seemed clearer for her. Well, at least a little. There were still some things she didn't quite understand, but none of that mattered at the moment to her. Now, all she wanted was to find Hiccup and share the news.

As Stormfly got closer to the grounds near the armory, Astrid took in a strong deep breath and yelled out, "Hiccup!"

Fanning the forge's fire, Hiccup's ears caught his name being called from outside. "Hiccup!" There it was again. Recognizing the voice that screamed his name, his heart suddenly started to race. Thinking of nothing more than negative reasons as to why he was hearing his name being called so unusually desperately, he panicked and released the fan's handle. Stumbling on his feet as he ran out of the shop and saw the blue Deadly Nadder approach the ground.

Astrid jumped from Stormfly's back without even waiting for her dragon to touch the ground. In no more than five seconds, Astrid's body was thrown over his.

Hiccup's arm automatically caught her in and held her tight. Both of them forgetting about the people that started to gather around them. "Astrid! Are you alright? What happened?"

She quickly pulled away from him, slightly bouncing on her heels, "Hiccup! Oh my gods \_Hiccup!\_ This...I...Oh dear, you won't believe it! It's-It's" Tries to recover her breath, "This is amazing!"



Seeing her enthusiasm and how her cheeks got redder by the second, only made him start laughing. "Hehe, I see something good happened today."

"Good?" She asks, "Incredible! Wonderful!" Corrects.

"Well then tell me already! You're getting me nervous." Hiccup teases.

Astrid's body finally stayed still. Both of her hands finding his by his sides and intertwining their fingers. Sparkling sapphire gems met emerald. Recovering her breath, Astrid brought their hands to her chest-level, "Hiccup, I am withâ€"

\_Booruuuul! Booruuul! Booruuul!\_

Both of their heads moved to the far side at the sound of the horns blowing. Hiccup's brows narrowed, while Astrid's eyes seemed lost for a quick moment. "No..." her lips allowed the whisper to escape.

The Vikings around them started to run and gather their weapons. Hiccup's hands squeezed hers while his eyes still frowned at the distance.

\_Booruuuul! Booruuul! Booruuul!\_

"Lady Astrid! Chief!" Eret's voice rang through the crowd. Her head turned to find Eret running up to them "The Hollibusians have been spotted. We must go to our assigned places right away."

"Right." Hiccup nods, then glances back at Astrid. "Remember, stick to the plan."

Astrid couldn't even bring herself to nod in response. Her hold in his hands tightened. She was about to tell him that she was with child. That the possible reasons of her feeling so weird lately \_could\_ have something to do with the child growing inside. Now, the timing wasn't the best for bringing up this kind of shocking conversation.

\_Those idiots just couldn't pick a better time to show up?!\_â€"She thought.

Feeling her, Hiccup's eyes destroyed the look of fury and determination in them for a quick second and as they fell to their joined hands, seeing how her fingers practically buried in his, Hiccup threw her arms over his shoulders, wrapped his around her waist and held her close.

"Promise me you'll be careful." She whispers in his ear. Tightening her hold over his shoulders.

"I promise." He whispers back. \_"You\_ promise you'll be careful."

"I promise." She says. "When all this is over, there is something I need to tell you."

"Then I am looking forward to it."

Hearing him, her lips found his neck and pecked it gently. Sooner

than they would ever want to, their bodies tore from one another and as she took small steps backwards, her hand slowly slid from his. He grasped on her fingers before their hands would part completely and she was then climbing on Stormfly's backâ€”where Eret already waited for her.

## 19. Treason

**\*\*AN: Expect updates one after the other up until chapter 27 ((27 IS NOT THE END OF THE STORY. IT GOES ON WAAAY FURTHER THAN THAT.))\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>"Seggr,"<p>

At the low yet firm call of \_man\_ in the old norse language, the soldier from the Northwestern region that stood alone in the woods gazing at the distance and holding his shield close to his chestâ€”proudly showing Berk's crestâ€”turned around to face a tall figure hiding inside a black leather cloak.

The soldier's brows furrowed. Trying to recognize the figure's facial features. But a black scarf covered half of its face. Only its dark eyes were exposed.

No time was given for the soldier to react or call for support from his comrades when the cloaked figure unsheathed its sword and instantly pushed it right below the soldier's epigastric fossa.

"Aarg!" Berkian moans. His hand trembles up to the figure's grip on the sword to pull it out, but the figure's other gloved hand grasped on the man's back of shoulder and pulled him in. Closing the distance between them.

Scarlet fluid began dripping from the man's parted lips. Gasping for air as the blade was being tilted upwards to try and pierce the heart from below. His eyes firm on his murderer's calmed ones. Hands crawling up the figure's broad arms and reaching for the hem of its scarf.

The figure pushed the man away, enough for the sword to be pulled out from his body.

Knees fell to the ground. Black scarf trapped by the last bit of strength remaining in his hand while the other hand pressed against the open wound.

Seeing the figure's face, the man's gaze switched from firm to one of sadness. His buttocks fell to the soft ground beneath, coughing and spitting out blood from his lungs until he finally managed to say between stolen breaths, "HvÃ-?"

\_Why? \_in the old norse language never sounded so hurtful. At least, not when it was an honest soldier's very last word. His body laid on its right, then flat back. His eyes never abandoned the figure's newly exposed facial features, until he released his last breath and no soul occupied his body. Leaving straight to Valhalla, with the unspoken knowledge of \_who\_ his murderer was.

The figure kneeled in front of the soulless man, took the scarf from its hold and then stood back up straight. Against its covered arm, the figure rubbed the sword's blade clean and then pushed it back into the sheath.

Covering its face once again with the scarf, the figure then started to walk forward. Its eyes caught the movement of a sky blue Deadly Nadder holding a net of big rocks in its teeth as it placed them on the ground by a tall and muscular man with black hair neatly brushed back into a ponytail and a blue striped tattoo for a beard.

The distance between the cloaked figure and the man and dragon was about fifty feet. The trees around them made it even easier for the figure to hide from the handsome man's sight—or the dragon's.

The figure watched how the man rubbed on the dragon's scales after taking the net from it's mouth and how the tamed beast leaned in closer to him as a blonde female carrying a brown-leathered knife roll walked up to them. It's eyes locked on her.

Slowly backing further away from them, the figure disappeared into the shadows provided by the trees.

Several pairs of eyes then came out from those same shadows. When their bodies were exposed to the light, one of them started to walk further. Stepping on a recently murdered man—by a spear through his heart—whose uniform had Smorton's symbol saved in the center of his chest.

"These should do the trick." The blonde female said as she placed the knife roll on the nearest boulder and unrolled it. Inside, there were eight knives of different sizes. Some thinner than others.

They were standing in their assigned region. Northwest. In front of them, they could enjoy a stunning sight of the ocean. The forest adjacent to Freya's Field was behind them. Soldiers and shield-maidens were already on their assigned positions all over the region. Waiting for their leader's call of attack.

"Pick whichever suits you best." Astrid said, then pointed her right forefinger at the case's left half. "But these are mine." Grins playfully.

"Heh, as you wish." Eret said while pulling out a spear point knife and rubbing his thumb against the blade. Testing its sharpness.

Not hearing her speak made him turn to face her. A dagger that looked even shinier than any other he had seen in his entire life, rested on both of her hands as her eyes fell lost on it.

He stepped closer to her. Getting a closer look. "What do you have there?"

"This used to be my father's." She says. Admiring every detail of it. The dagger's pommel and cross-guard was gold. It's grip was onyx and she could see her reflection on the blade.

To Eret, it was more than clear. No one had ever used it after Vincent's death.

The dagger's pommel had a double five-point star engraved. One star inside the other.

"\_The truth is strength\_," Astrid reads what is saved on one side of the blade, then turns it and reads the other side, "\_Forgiveness is power.\_" runs a thumb on the words. "I never understood what he meant by these words. How can you say something like this while holding a weapon that is meant to take lives away? After he died, my mother wanted to throw away all of his belongings. She said that mourning for someone was a waste of time and energy. His armor was the last thing she threw away. One night, while she slept, I snuck into my father's closet and saw the dagger well placed behind his shield. It instantly caught my attention. So I took it and ran back up to my room. I've been trying to hide it from my mother ever since." shakes head, "No. From \_everyone\_." Corrects, "I always kept it well hidden. Polished it every once in a while. Waiting for the right moment to be used." Looks up at him, "Like \_now\_."

Eret watched how Astrid turned her back to him, walked closer to the edge of the hill and while gazing at the far distance, she secured the dagger in its scabbard. She then lifted her maroon shirt, held it under her breasts with a hand and then slid the knife into her breast bands. Hiding the weapon between her breasts. Only for the use of an extreme emergency.

She loosened the knot of her bands only to quickly tighten it so that the weapon would be well secured. Thankful, that she didn't have that much breasts as to make her feel uncomfortable while moving.

"I truly hope, that I \_never\_ have to be the one to use this after you, father." She whispered to herself. Gazing at the skies. Knowing that somewhere up there, her father watched her every step.

Fixing her shirt, she walked back to Eret and grabbed two needle-point knives. Leaning her bum against the boulder, she brought her left boot to her right thigh and pushed one knife inside. Then did the same with the other knife.

Eret grabbed a bowie knife and slid it in his left forearm band. Then grabbed another and slid it on his belt behind his back. Seeing how unusually silent she was while fixing her axe behind her back, Eret cleared his throat and started to walk closer to the hill's edge. "I never got the chance to apologize."

"About?" She asks. Still working on the laces of her axe.

"Our last training session." Eret said. Gazing at the sun that began to hide behind the clouds as it slowly descended. "I failed you as a trainee when you needed my best performance. Not to forget mentioning, I have caused you a lot of trouble."

"Yeah, what happened to you back then?" She asks.

Eret shook his head, sitting down on the ground. "I have no idea. An unwanted thought invaded my mind and took away all of my concentration."

"What were you thinking of?"

"\_Her\_."

"The woman you talked about the day before I was supposed to leave Berk and marry Billus?" Astrid grabs a water canteen that laid against the catapult and drank from it while walking up to stand by him.

Eret nods as an answer. "You remind me of her. Strong willed, determined, beautiful" Feels as if all the memories I have worked so hard in locking away, have found their way to haunt me once again."

Astrid sat right next to him and offered him the canteen. He took it, slightly bowed his gratitude and then drank from it. "Was she \_that\_ special?" She asks.

"Very." He responds after swallowing. "I was a thirteen year old, but to me, she was the most beautiful creature in all my world. I always tried my best not to make a fool out of myself in front of her." Snickers at the thought, "But it only made me actually \_look\_ like a fool." Shrugs, "Though it seemed like it amused her since I always saw her laughing. That day, when we last trained at the arena, I couldn't control my thoughts and got distracted. I sincerely ask for forgiveness. For this, and all the trouble I have caused you and the young chief. Hiccup has offered me a home, I earned his trust and friendship, Skullcrusher's companionship wouldn't be changed for anything and your appreciation is like a valuable treasure. Yet, my actions have risked all those gifts countless times."

Astrid took in a deep breath, slowly letting it out, "You really touched my nerves back then. But I'd be lying to you if I dare say I hate you for it." Shrugs, "We've been through a lot these past few months. You just \_happened\_ to be there when I needed someone to talk to. I know you wouldn't betray Hiccup. Or me." Pauses, moving to lay on her stomach after seeing the sun getting closer to the horizon.

Eret mimicked her movement. Also laying on his stomach. Knowing that it was the ideal position to take as they waited for their turn to attack.

Astrid then continued, "I can't be eternally mad at you, Eret. After all, being angry takes too much energy." Teases with her last words. "Took me long enough to understand that Ruffnut's true intentions on saying what she did at the reunion about you and I, were only to make Osch change his mind on making me marry his son. It might not have been the \_best\_ way to do it, but how could I blame her? Heh, from \_Ruff\_? Things like these could be expected."

"So, do you forgive me?" Eret asks. Lowering his head timidly as he waited for an answer.

Astrid's lips stretched into a small smile, her head moved up and down and her lips parted to make way for a whisper, "Of course." Playfully pouts at him, "Just, don't let it happen again, got it?"

"No worries, fair lady."

Astrid rolled her eyes and released a slight chuckle that was cut off

by an arrow piercing the ground right between them. Having them immediately stand back on their feet and glance at their surroundings.

"\_Who\_ did that?" Astrid asks when then a cannonball smashed against the ground behind them and Eret's hand instinctively pushed Astrid's head down. His body fell over hers. Protecting her from the blasting that made dirt rain on them.

"Are you alright?" Eret asked.

"Yes. Are you?" Astrid says.

"Yes." He confirms. Waiting for the dirt to stop raining on them so he could stand back up. When Eret's head turned to look down at where the cannonball hit, he noticed several men climbing up the "not so tall" hill.

Astrid's brows narrowed, "They know our position." Hands close into fists, "\_Exactly\_ where we are!" Looks up at him, "How!?"

Eret hurried to find his bow and arrows while Astrid ran over to Stormfly. "Not sure." He says, "But one thing is starting to clear up for me. The arrow was a distraction, which means that someone already knew where we'd be and sent our enemies to us." Pauses, "Hiccup was right. There \_is\_ a traitor among us." Their eyes meet.

Astrid's jaw clenched, "Damn it!" Shakes her head, grabbing her bow and two arrows from the ground before speed walking away with Stormfly by her side. "Time for plan \_B\_."

"Yes, and \_C\_ and \_D\_ and \_E\_ and all the other known and unknown letters of the alphabet!" Eret says while shooting arrows down at the men to buy them some more time. "It's just you and me up here! Why don't we just hop on your dragon and go somewhere else?"

"Because \_that\_ might just be what our enemy is waiting for." Astrid responds, "If its true that someone has been playing with our every step, then whoever it is, is waiting for us to do just \_that\_. To jump on a dragon and then be shot in midair. Its an old trick, to kill three goats with one spear! Have you ever played \_chess\_, son of Eret?"

"Do you seriously call siting for hours staring down at sticks and rocks on a board, \_a game\_?!" Eret asks. Shooting an arrow at a man's glabella. Then one to his down-left. Into another man's thigh.

"Neither have I." Astrid laughs. "But I've seen Hiccup and Fishlegs play it several times. One thing I learned from it," Ties both arrows together, brings the end of strings to her mouth, pulls a knife from behind her back and cuts the end of the strings. Spitting them away and then sliding her knife back into her belt. " "Is that you need to be wiser than your opponent. No matter how stupid your movement might seem at first."

"Stormfly," Astrid calls while standing straight, aiming up ahead.

The Deadly Nadder stood about three feet away from her, slightly

bending her knees and lowering her head as her eyes focused on the two arrows in Astrid's hold.

"Wait for it!" Astrid says. Trying to find the perfect angle before releasing the arrows and seeing them fly up to the orange skies. "Wait for it!" her hand extends to Stormfly's direction as her eyes watched the arrows arch over the sun, she then yells, "Fire!"

Stormfly shoots fire at the arrows. Flaming them up as a sign of conceded permission for the soldiers in her assigned region to make their move. Astrid then turns back to Stormfly and starts running with her, "Go, girl. Go! Just as how we practiced. Hide and shoot for the skies. Let the others know we need the backup, then wait for my call. \_Go\_"

"Raaawk!" Stormfly spread her wings and flew off to the highest peak as fast as her wings could take her so she could make fire and sound signals high enough to let the dragons of regions closest to them know that they were being attacked.

Eret's grip on Astrid's arm made her drop her bow and look away from Stormfly's vanishing figure. Next thing she realized, was running through the woods, her arm pulled by Eret's hand. Arrows flying at them. "Time to run." Eret muttered within his breath.

Astrid's eyes widened at the sight they caught after hearing him, "Eret, look! Over there!" Pointing her free hand up ahead, as they ran, they spotted two soldiers"which they could have sworn sided with Astrid's team"sword-fighting each other.

There were men that wore Berk's crest in their shields, fighting others that \_also\_ wore Berk's crest. Warriors that wore Smorton's crest fought against those of Feyvor's crest, \_and\_ Berk's. It was hard to tell \_who\_ was the enemy, and who wasn't. Their enemy had \_disguised\_ itself as a friend, then to later mercilessly stab their backs.

"How are we supposed to fight if we don't even know who is on our side and who isn't?!" Eret asked. Irritated. "Aaah!" He fell on his knees once his ankles got tangled in a bola, dragging Astrid to the ground with him.

Her body rolled from his. Brushing her bangs from her forehead, she glanced around and noticed men running to their direction and aiming their weapons at them. In her mind, she calculated about a minute of spare time as she pulled a knife from her belt on her lower back, crawled back to Eret and cut the ropes around his feet.

"What are you doing?" He complained, "Time spent on freeing me is time you could use by saving yourself!"

"Where's the fun in that?" She pants, pulling the ropes from his ankles and throwing them away before grinning up at him.

Standing back on her feet, Astrid offered her hand to him. Without any hesitation, Eret took her hand and then was instantly pulled back up.

Eret drew his sword out, Astrid disengaged her axe. Their backs

against each other as they glared at the men that approached them.

Astrid's axe soon crashed against a man's sword. They pulled apart and crashed once more on her right side, then waved to crash on her left side. Her right hand let go of her axe's handle and fisted his jaw.

A robust soldier with the clan Feyvor's symbol saved in its shield came from behind Astrid's opponent and smacked the shield against his head, then pushed his sword through the man's sides. The tip of the sword poked out of the man's body, blood dripping to the ground. Astrid placed her palm on his forehead and pushed away. Having him lay dead on his back with a sword through his sides.

The helping soldier looked down at her and nodded once.

Astrid nodded in gratitude, but she then turned to see Eret sword fighting with a much slimmer blonde man with a helmet. When their swords were brought to their face-level, Astrid crouched to the ground and kicked on the man's ankles. Having him lose his balance and fall to the ground. Eret then kicked the man to lay on his back and buried his sword in the man's chest. Twisting it to the right and then pulling it out, Eret turned to glance back at Astrid. "We need help. Climb that tree and tell us what you see." Points his sword at a large tree behind her.

Astrid nods. "Shield me?"

"One second," Eret meets another warrior. Coming from his left as he swung his sword at Eret's head. Eret pushed the man's sword away with his own, kicked his foot on the man's gut and chopped the man's hand off. Seeing it fall from his arm while still gripping on the sword.

Astrid was facing the tree when Eret stood behind her. He turned his back to hers as she started to climb the tree. A tall woman warrior ran up to him. Waving her axe at them. Eret crouched and slapped her hand and axe away. But she was faster and pushed her knee against his sides. Eret groaned, then grasped her uniform and dragged her closer. The point of his sword now against the side of her neck as he turned them around and pushed her back against the tree's trunk.

The woman was not too slim, or too buff. She had tonedâ€"exposedâ€"arm muscles and strong thighs. Her hair was light brown and her messy braid reached her lower back. Eret eyed her from head to toe after fixing his blade horizontally against her throat. Slightly moving her chin up. Forcing her to look into his eyes. "Who sends you, traitor?"

The woman doesn't answer. Instead, she struggles against him. But he blocks her intents and takes the opportunity to glance down at the tribe's crest saved in her tunic. It was Berk's. "You are not a Berkian, are you?" He asks. "This is only a disguise!"

Seeing how she wouldn't answer, he pressed the blade more against her throat. "Speak!" He yells.

"You will have to rip my words out if you truly wish to know the answer. But my soul will flee with the truth." She hisses.



Eret's lips stretched mischievously. He then loosened his hold on her and stepped back. "Denying it only confirms my suspects."

The woman drew her fist back and punched his jaw. Then pulled a knife from her forearm-bands and as she guided it to his gut, Eret grabbed her wrist and yanked her in. Her face now close to his, "I'd love a fierce lady." He whispers, then pushes her away. Her back slamming against the tree's trunk. "But I dislike traitors."

Pushes his sword into her stomach. Closing his eyes while it. Clearing his throat and then pulling his sword back out. "Such a wasteâ€|"

Just then, the woman's body starts to melt. Black goo drops rolling down her skin and dripping to the ground until all that was left of her, was a puddle of black slime.

Eret's head tilted to the right. He bent on one knee and touched the goo with his sword's point. Bringing it up to his nose and sniffing it. "\_What\_ exactly are you?" Sniffs again, "Smells of nothing." He mutters. Dumbfounded, he stood back on his feet and gazed up at the tree's branches, where Astrid managed to climb up to the highest part of the tree. "Hurry, my fair lady. Before this bad feeling I have becomes a realityâ€|"

Astrid glanced down at her right, then at her left. Seeing how warriors that came out from the tree's shadows fought against those that teamed on her side. Confused by the fact that their warriors were practically fighting each other, she glared at the distance. At her far south, dots of fire also ascended from the horizon. "\_Meatlug\_" mumbles to self. Knowing that \_that\_ was the region assigned to Fishlegs and the twins.

\_We need the dragons\_â€"she thought.

Astrid leaned her back against the tree for support and cupped her hands around her lips. Tilting her head back, Astrid took in a deep breath and made the dragon call for Stormfly. "Aaauurrg, wuuuarg! Aaauurrg, wuuuarg! Aaauurrg, wuuâ€" \_Swoosh\_! Her call was interrupted by an arrow that flew past her cheek and pierced the tree's trunk.

\_Time's up!\_â€"she thoughtâ€"\_get the hel out of here before you become a target again.\_

Once back on the ground, Astrid started to run with Eret following just a few feet from her to back her up.

The sound of loudâ€"and heavyâ€"trotting made Eret's lips form a relieved smile, "Geesh, what took you so long?!"

When Astrid glanced over her shoulder at him, she saw a green and red Rumblehorn send three opponents flying away with a single hit from his head.

Eret glanced back at Astrid and nodded at her, "You go. I have Skullcrusher with me now." Pauses to pull a spear from a dead man's chest, "Go and get help. I'll follow later."

Astrid didn't answer. She just continued running. Dodging a sword that suddenly swung near her face. A buff man waving his sword at her. She pushed his sword away with her axe and punched his jaw. But that wouldn't weaken him at all. The man grinned down at her and pulled a dagger out from his belt, brushing it across her cheek.

Her hand moved up to her cheek, touching a thin opening that allowed some blood drip from her skin. She waved her axe to his left, crashing it with his sword. Then she kicked his kneecaps and pushed the axe's eye against his chest.

The man ran over to her, she dodged him. But he took a hold of the ends of her braid and yanked her down to the ground. He then stepped on her hand so she'd let go of the axe and when she did, he kicked the weapon away from her reach.

About to stand back up, the man placed his foot against her chest. Pushing her down again. Having her on her back, he drew his sword back over his shoulder, aiming at her heart when she rolls around. He hissed and quickly kicked her twice against her abdomen. "Aurg, stay still!"

Groaning aloud, Astrid's hand quickly covered her abdomen. Her eyes raged with fury as she took hold of unknown strengths, kicked one leg against the man's groin and then stood back up. Picking her axe from the ground and gripping it tightly, "How \_dare\_ you!?"

Faster than the blink of an eye, her axe was drawn back and then slid through the man's throat. Head rolling down on the ground and stopping by her feet. She kicked it away and in short pants, she continued walking while rubbing her free hand on her lower abdomen. "Don't worry, I'll protect you." pants, "Even if I have to chop some heads off. I won't let \_anyone\_ hurt you, so hang in there little one." pauses, "Please, hang in thereâ€¦"

"Stormfly!" She called. "Stormfly!" calls again. Starting to run a lot faster, heading towards a cliff. An arrow brushed her right thigh. Tearing her leggings open. "Stormfly!"

\_Okay, Astrid. Think of something. Think! Think! Think!\_â€"she thoughtâ€"\_We can't do much with just a few blades when you've got so many against you. We'd have toâ€"\_

"Squaawk!" Stormfly's loud response cut off the thread of thoughts that started to form in her mind. When she turned her head to the side, she saw Stormfly flying at her speed.

Astrid smiled, "Glad to see you, girl! Ready?"

"Guuurr!" Stormfly speeded up.

Reaching the cliff's edge, Astrid jumped from it. Stormfly pushed herself further trying to get closer to her rider and then gave in a slight turn to have Astrid land on the saddle.

Holding onto the saddle's handle, Astrid sighed in relief, "Thank you, girl." Pets her.

\* \* \*

><p>Sundown. Already half of the sun seemed like it was being slowly eaten up by the ocean. Gobber had released the dragons as soon as Skullcrusher and Cloudjumper left to find their riders once they sensed the danger. He took their move as a sign to release the other dragons and be well aware of his surroundings. Berk hadn't been attacked yet.<p>

However, at sea, things didn't look at all that pretty. Turns out, that sailors in the ships that represented the alliance between Berk, Icso, and Larlis, started attacking their comrades out of the blue. Souzbog's and Matlus' troop captain learned that their enemy was right under their nose, that all they could do was fight no matter who they were fighting against and then in the end see how their attacker melted into a puddle of black goo.â€”which was also far from normal.

Many ships were already sent to the depth of the ocean, many more were still sinking and under angry flames.

At the northern region, things were still calm. Cloudjumper had found Valka, and even though she couldn't understand his reasons to violate the rules of their plan just yet, she stayed close to her dragon and kept her sight at the distance.

Hiccup, was sitting on Toothless' back, glaring also at the fog that had started to form up ahead. Making it difficult for them to identify anything from the distance.

Suddenly, Toothless' gums reveal his teeth, a bright blue started to show all the way down his spine and tail, and low inner growls alerted Hiccup.

"What's wrong, bud?" he asks, "What do you see?"

Toothless just continues growling. His right paw slowly moving forward.

"Toothless?" Hiccup asks.

Spiiuuh!

A loud holler came from the fog. Then, the clouds were pierced by a large creatureâ€”about the size of a Scauldronâ€”made out of fire.

"What is that?" Hiccup asks.

Valka climbs on Cloudjumper's back, "I have never seen one like that before."

"A-a new dragon?" Hiccup asks.

Focusing her eyes on the creature, Valka shakes her head, "No, that is not a dragon. Look, Hiccup." Points at it, "It has no solid body."

And she was right. The creature's body was fire. Literally. Its head took the shape of a peacock, while the rest of its body looked like an eagle. Its flames illuminated the now slightly dark sky as it got closer to the northern region.

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs' voice stormed through Hiccup's ears. He turned to glance behind him and found Fishlegs and Astrid on their dragons, flying towards them.

Fishlegs was holding a small "dark brown" book in his right hand while the other held onto Meatlug's side. "This creature does not appear in the Book of Dragons, but Bork The Bold has mentioned it on some loose pamphlets. It's called a \_Phoenix\_. The reason why the Phoenix isn't mentioned in the Book of Dragons is".

"Because its not a dragon?" Astrid cuts him off, "Fishlegs, we already noticed that. Mind getting straight to the point?"

"Where does the Phoenix come from, Fishlegs?" Hiccup asks. Already flying up to join the other two dragon riders.

"That's the thing, Hiccup." Fishlegs shakes his head, "In order to \_create\_ a Phoenix, there must be some kind of sorcery involved. Otherwise, how could you turn \_fire\_ into a flying beast?"

"That's not all, Hiccup." Astrid says, "People that die out there \_aren't\_ humans. They melt into some kind of black slime after a few seconds of being killed and"

\_Spiiuuh! \_

Astrid's news were cut off short by the Phoenix's holler that got louder by the second as the creature flew closer.

The Phoenix made a slight turn to the right, then glided downwards. Opening its mouth and releasing threads of fire from it. The threads gracefully showered down at the ground. Burning everything in its way.

Toothless started to shoot plasma blasts at the Phoenix, but his shots went right through the creature's flamed body and blasted in the air.

"It goes right through it!" Hiccup says.

"Dark magic." Fishlegs reminds him.

"We have to think of a way to distract it and take it away from the grounds, or else it will burn everything and everyone in it." Astrid says.

"Then let's do just that." Hiccup agrees.

Toothless pushed himself upwards, straight for the Phoenix while Stormily and Meatlug flew beneath it.

Astrid cups her hands around her mouth, "Hey you!" yells, "Over here!"

The Phoenix turned to her. Hollered once "Spiiuuh!" then flew down at her.

"Uh, mister Phoenix?" Fishlegs calls from the other side. The Phoenix stops and turns to see the Gronckle and rider. "Hate to disturb your

meal time, but, would you like to just \_not\_ destroy our archipelago? We kinda spent a few years protecting it from very big and mean dragons."

"Um, Fishlegs? I honestly doubt he cares about our needs. Don't think talking it out would be the answer." Hiccup says, as he sees the Phoenix holler and turn to fly at Meatlug's direction.

"Could you just stop trying to push sense into me and figure out a way to get this thing far away from here!?" Fishlegs freaks out, waving both of his arms in the air in despair as he watched how the Phoenix speeds towards him. "Someone's quite angry now!"

Stormfly flipped her tail upwards and eight spines flew from her tail and pierced the air right in the Phoenix's beak. Making it turn to where the spines came from. Following the Deadly Nadder and Night Fury that flew farther away from land.

"I think its working." Astrid says, "Now what?"

\_Spiiuuh! Spiiuuh!\_

The Phoenix's holler didn't give Hiccup a chance to even respond to Astrid's question. Both riders glanced over their shoulders to find the Phoenix changing course at the sight of a bright purple mist that appeared right in front of it and guided it back to land.

"Uh, Hiccup? Do you see what I see?" Astrid asks.

"Definitely." Hiccup nods. "Let's follow it and try to capture its attention once again."

And so they did follow the "huge" flying bird in flames. Shooting plasma blasts combined with spine shots didn't succeed this time in catching the Phoenix's attention. It seemed like the purple mist that glowed in the now dark skies had the creature well lured.

The Phoenix rose its wings in midair and then impulsed itself downwards. Heading straight to the island where Hiccup, Valka and all the warriors and weapons had originally been "and were now already sacrificing their lives for their land and superiors as they fought their enemies.

Spreading its wings wide, the Phoenix laid its body over the land and its flames spread all over the place. Its body disappeared, yet the flames remained. Angrier than ever before. Burning every tree, every human, every living organism in its way. Claiming the territory as if it had always meant to belong to fire and wind.

"Hiccup!?" Astrid called, seeing him and Toothless fly right into the fire and disappearing in violent flames. "Hiccup!" Calls again. Pressuring Stormfly to follow after them.

"Astrid, wait!" Fishlegs called for her. But she and Stormfly were already sucked into the barrier of flames that closed up after they trespassed them.

Within the intense dark smoke that troubled their vision, the loud screams of women and men being burned alive or murdered by someone else made it even harder to trust on their hearing. Astrid stood

still on the ground. Her back to Stormfly. Her knees were slightly bent and her right hand tightly gripped her axe. "Easy, girl." She says, trying to avoid having to unnecessarily dodge a flying spine from Stormfly's tail thanks to how scary their surroundings might feel like.

"Wuuuaaaah!" The sounds of a Night Fury before releasing a plasma blast came from her far left. She turns. Seeing small "purple and blue" explosions ahead.

Without any hesitation, Astrid dashed towards them. Seeing how the smoke slowly vanished in the air. Finding Hiccup's back to her as he sword-fought against another warrior.

The warrior brushed its blade across Hiccup's chest, but it only caused his flight suit to tear open. No skin was touched.

Hiccup pushed his opponent's sword away and kicked his prosthetic leg against his lower abdomen, then Toothless came in and sent the man flying away with just one slight push from his paw.

Panting, Hiccup sheepishly smiles at his friend, "Thanks, bud."

Astrid's corner of eye caught a fire ball headed at Hiccup and Toothless' direction. Stormfly's spines flying over Toothless' head to pierce three soldiers running at them caught the Night Fury's attention. Having Astrid's chest suddenly feel unusually tight. Before she could even think of controlling her impulses and simply call out, her feet were already dashing toward Hiccup, she grabbed an abandoned shield in her way, and pushed him down to the ground "Watch out!" she yells.

Hiccup's arms instinctively trapped her in, having her fall down with him. He rolled them around, his body over hers.

The hand that held the shield moved over their heads. One of Hiccup's hands was wrapped around her waist, holding her tight against his body while his other hand kept her head close to his chest. Holding her still so she wouldn't pull away as he hid his face in her hair and felt the heat of the fireball blast over the shield she held over them.

Toothless jumped in front of the two riders and started to shoot plasma blasts at the smoke in front of them. Caring less about what he could hit, as long as he could catch whatever shot his best friend.

"Astrid?!" Hiccup breathlessly calls her name. Moving his face a little away and loosening his grip on her head.

She looked up at him and after a long sigh of relief, her lips stretched into a faint smirk. "Good, you didn't get yourself roasted." teases.

Hearing her, Hiccup confirmed that she was more than just alright. He pulled away from her and stood back on his feet. Offering his hand out to her.

She took his hand in hers and as soon as she stood on her feet, she

threw the shield down and went to find her axe.

Little did she know that the few seconds that took her to turn her back to Hiccup and their dragons, and find her axe, only took her farther away than she would expect when an arm was thrown over her neck from behind and her body was pulled backwards. A dagger's blade pressing against her throat. "We meet again, my dearest."

"That voiceâ€¦" she thought.

"Did you miss me?" Speaks again. The voice was deep, a man's voice. Damp, dark brown curls brushed against her cheeks as she felt him move his face closer to hers and over her shoulder.

"Ugh, let go of me you!" She struggled. Locking her free hand on his wrist to keep it from threatening her skin.

He snickers within his breath, "Heh, not this time, baby. You're mine." Sniffs her neck, exhaling deeply, "\_Finally\_."

"Keep dreaming buddy." Clenches jaw, "I'd never let an asshole like you have me."

"True." He agrees, releasing his hold on her and pushing her away so she'd have a chance to turn and face him. "But reality is far better than a useless dream."

When she rubbed her neck with her free hand and caught back her breath, Astrid turned to face him. Her eyes raged with fury at his figure. "Billus." Mutters.

Billus hadn't changed since the last time she saw him. Tall and beefy, with dark brown curls that brushed over his sweaty and pale shoulders. Loosened bangs hovering over his eyelashes. He was wearing black trousers and dark brown fur-boots. His chest was bare. Exposing all the scars that adorned his skin and the blue tattoo in the form of a bear's paw that marked his left pectoral region.

"Why don't you make my job a lot easier and come with me?" Billus asks. Tilting his head to the side as he watched her spot her axe on the ground, cautiously bend down, and grab it. "Save some energies for when you actually need them."

"Why on Freya's braids would I go anywhere \_with you\_?!" She says.

Their feet started to step to the side. Hers taking her to the right, his also moving to the right. Slowly circling as Billus gripped on his sword with both hands and relaxed his shoulders. "As you wish." Shrugs, "Not that I actually expected you to give in that easily."

Astrid releases a "quickâ€¦" mocking laughter, "As if!"

Billus nods, "You know, I am not very demanding when it comes to women."

"What are you talking about?" Astrid asks.

Billus waves his sword and signals her with it. "I know you made your

marriage to the weak-stick official in front of nearly all the village. I don't really care if his handprint is all over you now." Grins at her, "On all contrary, it makes me shake of desire to think you've gained \_experience\_."

"Would you shut the hel up?!" She snaps, "None of that is of your concern and the people that enjoy pushing their noses into matters that don't call their name make me want to cut their tongues out."

"Talk, talk, talk, \_talk\_." Billus mocks. "That's all you are. Too much of a babbler and no action. Of course, I wouldn't expect much from a fatherless woman. All useless." Spits the ground between them.

Astrid's grip around the axe's handle tightened. Her jaw clenched and her muscles stiffened. He was touching her nerves. Ticking her bomb and pushing her to the edges of patience. "Did you just insulted my father?" She wanted to know the meaning hidden behind his mocking. Even though she knew his answer would probably make her lose the last drop of calm in her, deep inside, she \_wanted to hear it. \_

"You tell me." He grins, slowly stepping closer to her. "Unless you'd prefer my sword to answer that for you. Hum?"

"That's it!" She snaps, waving her axe up in circles over her head, "I've had it with that annoying tone of yours." Throws her arms down, making their blades crash against each other on their face-level. "I knew the kind of skunk bag you were the moment you took my hand and greeted me at the docks. Your ways of treating others like meaningless worms could be spotted from the far distance." Pulls her axe back, waving it to his left, crashing it with his sword once again.

"Oh, but you were willing to abandon everything you loved and give yourself to me, am I wrong?" He growls. Pulling his sword back and waving it over her right side. Crashing blades together once again over their shoulders.

"A true warrior gives its life for its people," Their weapons are brought down to their abdomen-level as she responds, "Someone with a heart would gladly sacrifice its freedom for those whom he or she loves." She pushes his sword away. Their weapons crash together again on their face-level. She leans her face closer to the blades, tilts her head slightly to the side, "But you know \_nothing\_ of sacrifice or honor, do you?"

Astrid pushed her axe forward, then jumped backwards to stand away from him. "While most criticized me behind my back, I knew my decision would either bring misery or success to my people." Signals at him with the head of her axe, "That compact made by our late chief only saved you from dying poisoned. Instead of fighting me about it, you should be thankful!"

Billus' gaze on her wasn't anywhere near good. No. He looked at her with the eyes of revenge. She could almost see the ocean-blue color of his eyes darken with rage. He wanted to have her. In all possible ways. Even now that she had another man in her life. Women that defended their own rights, were scarce. Only warriors did that. In the village from where Billus came from, there weren't many



female-warriors that would catch his eye. Meeting Astrid, a beautiful, smart, strong willed and fearless warrior only made him crave for her. It angered him that a woman with the attributes she carried, preferred a muscleless man for a husband and lifelong companion.

Her words then made his shoulders fall for a slight second, "Billus, I \_don't\_ want to kill you. I can give you a chance to redeem yourself \_only\_ if you promise me not to try something stupid against me or my people."

Billus' eyes fell to the ground, as if thinking her words through. His neck then twitched and his brows curled into a tight frown. He gripped on his sword and ran toward her, raising the weapon over his head. "Never! Either you are mine, or no one's!"

"You know, I've always hated possessive people too." She shrugs, then crouches to the ground and as he ran past her, she straightened up and kicked her foot on his bum. Having him fall on his knees. "Oh, well. No one could dare say I didn't try."

The smoke around them started to fade away. This time, for sure. Billus stood back on his feet and waved his sword at her again. She stopped it over her head with her axe and gritted her teeth at the force he was applying to them.

"Graawn!"

The sound of a Deadly Nadder's close approach made Billus' hold on the sword slightly loosen. Giving Astrid enough time to push the blade away from her face and press her right foot on his groin. He fell to the ground. She stepped on his wrist and moved her foot side to side so he'd let go of the sword. When he did, she kicked the weapon away and then pushed him to lay on his back. Her eyes explored his body. Then her shoulders relaxed and while thinking that he wasn't worth for her to spend her energies in no more, she turned her back to him and started to walk away.

"Coward!" Billus spat. "I know your secret."

Astrid's feet froze. "What nonsense are you saying now?" Slowly turning, glancing over her right shoulder back at him.

Billus struggled to kneel. It took him about a minute to stand completely on his feet as he glared at her, "I know your secret." repeats. "There is a bastard inside your womb. Isn't there?"

"H-how?" Her voice broke. She\_ just learned\_ she was with child. Few hours ago, to be exact. How could someone that hadn't seen her in long weeks, know it before \_she\_ would?!

"It is obvious, isn't it?" Mischievously laughs while dragging his feet closer to her. "Your hips are wider than I remember." pauses, "Plus, I have a well trusted \_source\_ that has told me so."

"Liar." She mumbles. Still not believing the fact that someone would know her stage before she didâ€"and on top of it, go and tell their enemies about it. "Who spilled such a lie!?" She growls.

He snickers, "What is there of importance now?" He asks. "Once I get my hands on you, I will enjoy taking away everything left from the degenerated you oh-so-lovingly call husband. That child of yours, won't even see the light of day, because I will make sure to rip your insides apart anâ€"

"Stop!" Astrid's free hand ghosted over her abdomen. Feeling how her insides ached with the sole image that started to form in her head from his words. Her eyes widened and the air around her felt impossible to breathe.

But no matter how loud she would scream for him to stop talking on ways to murder her child, Billus continued talking as he stepped closer. "Oh, yes. I will make you regret every little bit of humiliation you, your dearest lover and your worthless friends have caused me and my father. I will make your eyes see the creature that now lives and dreams inside you, die by my very own hands. I willâ€"

Sliiice! \_

Silenced by the axe that flew from her hand, rolled toward him and sliced his neck off his body. Billus' head fell to the ground, stuck in the axe's blade. His knees hit the ground first, then the rest of his body fell on his side and finally turned by gravity to lay on his back.

Moonlight on the soft brown earth, shining on the body laying lifeless by her feet as her feet stumbled on nothing. Her bum met the ground. Her back hit against a boulder that she didn't even know was there. Her eyes drifted to the skies. Hands quickly moving up her abdomen. Hugging herself.

Lips trembling. Fingers shaking over the still flatness of her stomach. "H-how oldâ€|" Her voice shaken, trying to ask her child how long had it been inside her womb even though she knew it was impossible to receive an answer. Yet she couldn't finish the question. If Billus knew she was with child, even before she knew it herself, then someone had been watching her every step, controlling her every step, then spraying words of her movement to her enemies.

Swallowing with difficulty, Astrid's eyes fell to her abdomen. Slowly shaking her head, her fingers carefully buried in her stomach, "This is what I feared. The outcomes of having you while still in this mess." Breathes in, "H-how much more will you suffer while I fight for your safety?" pauses, "I-I could care less of what happens to me, but you? Couldn't you just wait a little longer?" releases a soft chuckle. Knowing that now, she could do nothing, except to try everything in her power to protect her child. No matter what happens.

"Now, now." Gently rubs her abdomen, "I promised you earlier, and I will keep my promise. As long as I live, I will fight to protect you, my child."

Her surroundings were quiet. She was too focused in sending Frigga softâ€"silentâ€"prayers of protection on her child that she didn't realize all the dead bodies laying all over the place, and the silence that embraced a battlefield after it was all finally over.

There was not even one living soul. Only hersâ€”And Stormfly, who had found her and now stood by her side, glancing at their surroundings.

Just as how Fishlegs predicted, there was a full moon providing light down to them. The sound of cannons bombing at other ships started to fade away. She didn't know if it was because there were too many lives already taken to Valhalla, or if it was because her thoughts were focused in her silent prayers.

While it, Billus' neck slowly unglued from the blade and rolled down the hill. Stopped by a large foot at the end of the field. Picked up by two beefy hands and turned to see the head's facial features.

The hands holding Billus' head trembled, then let go of it. Letting it fall to the ground. The man took in a deep breath and with all that was left in his lungs, he screamed, "Gaaaaaaarrr! My son!"

Astrid's head popped up at the sound of a man's mourn. Feeling as if some kind of force had pulled her arms up and set her back on her feet, she saw Osch screaming after seeing his son's head.

The wind blew strong around her and Stormfly. Her messy and slightly darkâ€”because of dirtâ€”hair danced with it, and her already dried scratches itched at the cold feeling of breeze rubbing against them. A soft whisper into her ear, "\_Run," \_

Unsure whether she was hearing things, or not, the moonlight slowly moved to her feet. Just then, the wind became a little harsher around her, as it whispered once again, "\_Run\_,"

Her feet seemed to move on their own, when she found herself running after seeing Osch spot her.

The man yelled even louder, in sorrow. Both of his arms drew back and then forward. Quick threads of dark shadows emerging from his shoulder blades, flying over him and heading straight at her. "Seize her!"

\* \* \*

><p>Laying on the ground, struggling with a man's dagger trying to pierce his left eye, Eret chewed on his inner cheeks and spat on his opponent's face. When his opponent loosened his grip on the dagger, Eret pushed the man away and Skullcrusher's head banged against the warrior's sides. Breaking his bones and throwing him away.<p>

"Raaawrk! Raaaawrk!" The sounds of a familiar Deadly Nadder made his attention be drawn away from Skullcrusher as he glanced at the skies, seeing the moon shining over the figure of a dragon flying from what looked like several shadows that chased after her.

Without any hesitation, Eret swung his leg over his dragon's broad back and pushed himself on. "Come on, Skullcrusher! Go!"

The Rumblehorn huffed, focused its eyes at the Deadly Nadder as he trotted and then took off to the skies after it.

"Faster, Skullcrusher. Faster!" Eret urged. Seeing how the shadows got closer to the sky-blue Deadly Nadder. "Astrid!" He yelled. Despair escaping his voice. "Astrid!"

But she couldn't hear him. The wind wouldn't let her hear him. As Skullcrusher gave in all of his strengths to fly after them, Eret's eyes widened in shock when a green flash illuminated the horizon, and the shadows, and the Deadly Nadder, disappeared into it.

"No! Astrid!" Eret yelled. Almost leaning forward on his dragon. Making Skullcrusher growl loudly so Eret would snap out of it and realize that if he leans any further, he might fall from the saddle.

Eret's brows then narrowed. Without a second thought, he fixed his bum in the saddle, moved his shoulders forward and said, "Trace them, Skullcrusher." Slightly shakes head. "\_Find\_ them." Corrects.

No other word was needed to be spoken. Skullcrusher huffed and gave all energies left in him to flying across the ocean, following the thin trace he could trust that would lead them to where Astrid was. Well, or so they hoped...

\* \* \*

><p>Door creaks open.<p>

Revealing a rounded room, with gray stoned floors and stoned walls.

"Hey, watch it!" A female's voice echoed in the cell once she was pushed inside by a masked figure completely covered in black robes.

The young girl fell on her knees and quickly turned to sit, facing the masked figure that took her in while she argued with her brother, debating on \_who\_ would go \_where\_ next. She stood back on her feet and moved forward, but the masked figureâ€"which was a lot biggerâ€"easily pushed her back down.

The corner of the slim, tall and young woman's eye caught a familiar body laying on a corner. When she turned to look at it, she saw how its wrists were brought over the head, chained to the wall behind. Ankles chained to the stoned floor.

The girl tilted her head to the side, studying the body before her eyes.

Dark blue leggingsâ€"tore apart from the fightâ€", dark brown and hairy boots, spiked skirt, maroon shirt, blonde hair that once might have been fixed into a nice braidâ€"but now it only looked like a dirty mess...

"Astrid?" The girl's low voice curiously called. Slowly crawling toward her. Placing a hand on the girl's shoulder pad-free shoulder and gently turning her around so she could see the girl's face. Eyes widening when the figure's identity was confirmed. "Astrid!" Shakes her, "Astrid! Wake up! It's me, Ruff! Astrid! How the hel did you get in here!? Hey, snap out of it! Asâ€"ah!"

Yanked away by the masked figure, Ruffnut was tossed to the other side of the cell. The figure tried to shackle her to the wall as well, but Ruffnut started to kick her arms and legs at the figure at incredible speed. Making it quite impossible to be tied down so easily. "What did you do to my friend!? Where have you taken us?! Show me your face you shit-eating coward!"

The figure pulled back. Without spreading a single word, the figure agilely slid out of the cell and closed the arched wooden door. Ruffnut threw herself at it, trying to open the door from the other side when a loud \_CLANK\_ made it impossible for her to even move the door open. It was locked. And with a speed she couldn't compete with.

Ruffnut turned back at her friend. Then hurried to her. Kneeling by her side and placing the fingertips of her right hand on Astrid's cheek. "You're still warm." She says, then looks down at the girl's chest. Seeing how it slowly rose and fell. "And you are breathing." Sighs in relief and sits down. "Good. You're still alive."

Tilts head to the side, "But, how did they knock \_you\_ out?" Raises brow.

"She cannot hear you," A male's voice came from the door that creaked open once again. A tall, slimâ€"but very well tonedâ€"man slid in holding a bowl in his hands. As soon as he slid in, the door shut closed behind him. Locked.

His hair was as white as a cloud, straight, and it reached his hips. He dressed in dark green robes, his feet hidden under them. The long sleeves hid his arms and hands from a simple glance. He had long nailsâ€"for a guyâ€"oval shaped. His lips looked like they were kissed by a sacred pale-pink rose and his eyes were almond shaped, with the color of sweet honey. His right ear had a long earring that reached almost to his mid-neck-level. The earring took the shape of a diamond crystal and it's color was as pure and clear as glass itself save for the earring's end, which showed a pitch black shade.

Seeing how the girl studied him from head to toe with an alarming gaze, the male released a low chuckle and knelt in front of her. Gently placing the bowl on the floor.

When she looked down at the bowl's content, her eyes moved back up at him.

"Water," He says. Then quickly adds, "Please, do not fear of me or see me as a threat. My name, is Radames."

"How am I supposed to trustâ€"" Ruffnut's words were cut off short as soon as she noticed his hands when he slowly pushed the ceramic bowl closer to her. "â€"you?" voice fades away.

A trail of purple and dark blue spiral patterns adorned his palms and created a trail up on the back of his hands, and all the way to his forearms.

Seeing her eyes focused on his now exposed hands, Radames cleared his throat and shook both hands so his sleeves would cover them once again. "I am no foe." He whispers, "Believe me, I have been a slave here for more than three months."

"\_Three months\_?!" Ruffnut asks.

"Shh!" He hurries, glancing over his shoulder at the door, then back at her, "Yes, more than that. I was captured by demonic shadows and brought here to serve."

"Dude, do you even hear how stupid your words sound?" Ruffnut pouts, then chuckles mockingly, "Demonic shadows, heh, yeah, right." mutters to herself.

"It's true." He hurries. "There is no time right now to explain, but I will ease your worries by assuring you that your friend will be alright." Signals at Astrid with his forefinger, "She was taken by those same shadows and in order to stop her from fighting back, they put her into a deep sleep."

"But, will she wake up?" Ruffnut asks.

Radames nods, "She will. When the spell wears off, she will."

Ruffnut frowns at him, "You better be telling the truth."

"Radames?" A sweet, female voice whispered from the other side of the closed wooden door. "Brother, are you still in there? Please come out before they see you and punish you again. \_Please\_."

"Yes, sister." Radames whispered forcefully back. Standing back on his feet and hurrying to the door.

Ruffnut quickly pushed herself forward and ran to the door, but Radames locked it closed just when she threw herself against it. Regretfully sliding down to the floor, she muttered "Shitâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p>Hours passed. The little air she slowly managed to breathe was stolen away by an undesired twinge in her lower abdomen. Her brows narrowed and her hands closed into fists as her stomach contracted. The sound of chains crashing against each other and being unable to bring her hands lower than her shoulders forced her eyes to open. Finding herself in a cell with stoned walls and stoned floors. An arched wooden door at the end of the room. One torch by the door. "Mmnh," Moans, until her lips parted and inhaled some more air. The twinge finally stops.<p>

"Morning sunshine." Sarcasm dripped from a familiar voice that came from her far right. Seeing Ruffnut sitting on the floor and leaning against the stoned wall with both knees brought up to her chest. "â€|or nightâ€|" shrugs, "Hard to tell if there are no windows."

"Where are we?" Astrid asks. "How did we get here?"

"Well, I was arguing with Tuffnut about how he always gets to make the dragon call for Barf and Belch when then suddenly a cloaked creep riding a horse trapped me in a net and took me away like a potato sack."

Astrid rose a brow, "And you let yourself get caught \_that\_ easily?!"

Ruffnut shrugs, "He was fast enough to make it hard for me to cut myself free. What else would you expect from me?"

Astrid rolled her eyes and sighed aloud. "We have to get out of here."

"How?" Ruffnut asks. "There is some kind of weird magic involved in all this. Plus, we have no dragons."

"Dragons?" Astrid mumbles to herself, "Stormfly! Where is she?! Ruff!"

Ruffnut's mouth opened to answer her when the door creaked open and a much louder voice stormed into the cell.

"That pest of yours was sent back to Berk."

Into the cell, three figures entered. The one in the middle was dressed in a black cloak, black leather gloves and a black scarf that covered half of its face and only revealed the figure's dark eyes.

On the figure's either side, two guards dressed in black armor walked toward Ruffnut and as she struggled against them, one managed to press its dagger against her throat while the other chained her arms to the wall.

"Hey!" Astrid called for the guards, "Leave her alone! Hey!"

"Fight all you want." The figure standing by the door calmly said. "They only listen to me."

"And who the hel do you think you are?" Ruffnut asked once the guards let go of her and quickly moved out of the cell. "The ruler of the dark clowns? Hehe," Mocks.

"Not quite." The figure responded. Slowly stepping toward Astrid—who only kept a glare at it.

"Why don't you show your face to us, coward?" Astrid says.

The figure didn't respond. It only got closer to Astrid and when its feet halted by Astrid's knees, the figure slightly bent closer, slowly pushed the hood down, left hand up to the scarf and pulled it down, then off.

Astrid's eyes widened, Ruffnut's jaw dropped. Yet the female twin's shoulders stiffened and she soon started to kick her legs as if to try and stand up. But the chains on her wrists only allowed her to kneel and lean forward—which she did. "\_Traitor\_"

## 20. Broken

"Traitor!"

Ruffnut's yells pierced through Astrid's ears. Low, soft. Crawling

down her neck and straight into her ribcage. Taking the form of laces wrapping around her heart and squeezing it tight. Her eyes trying to look at everything, and nothing at the same time. Endless thoughts begging that said eyes were playing tricks on her. "\_Mother,\_"

The words escaped her lips. Meant to be released as a question, yet ending like a ghost's whisper getting lost in thin air.

Big Boobied Bertha's body stood right before her daughter's eyes. Lips twisted into a wicked smile, and hands hidden behind her back. "Surprised?" she asks.

"Not me!" Ruffnut spat before Astrid could even think of how to speak. "I knew you'd be up to something from the moment Astrid said you blessed hers and Hiccup's marriage. Only a fool wouldn't see your doubtful behavior. Being nice after turning your back to her, then nice again. But you didn't get to trick me. Valka, Phlegma and my mom were dumbfounded when they heard you had blessed Astrid's marriage and showed some affection to her. I for once, knew that something stunk around here!"

"\_She\_ didn't suspect." Bertha says. Signaling at a still silent Astrid whose eyes had finally fallen from her mother's image. "A little love song and some sweet words did enough." Snickers, "I honestly thought I'd have to work a lot harder."

"And for what, exactly?" Ruffnut's hands balled into fists. Hanging from her shackled wrists as she leaned forward, glaring up at the woman and speaking as if someone else had been taking control over her words. "Did you sell your soul to Hel or what?!"

Bertha shrugs, "You could say that." Looks back down at Astrid. Glares, "Look at me."

Astrid's expression remained emotionless. As if Bertha's words didn't reach her at all.

"I said," Bertha pulled out a spear pointed knife. Hovering it over Astrid's lower abdomen, "\_Look\_ at me." Showing her teeth once she saw her daughter react and move her bum to the sides, away from the weapon. "So, you know now. Am I wrong?"

Astrid's eyes darted up at Bertha. Wide open.

"How did I know, will you ask?" Bertha asks. "Momma knows everything, my dear Astrid. Everything." Draws her knife back and absently rubs the sides of it on her chin. "Hm, I see that you are still quite flat. Good, good. Means that you and Hiccup very well understand the position life has put you two in. It would be a complete shame to see you with a small bump before saying your vows the way Frigga commands it."

Taken aback, Astrid gasps, "â€|what are you saying?"

"It wasn't at all that easy, you know. Yeh were always keeping yourself busy with the other kids and their flying lizards. Spending most of the day exploring and discovering new things. Sleeping under the same roof as me, was the only time we actually shared together and still, it wasn't enough. I had to come up with something that wouldn't require you to be always so close to me. Something that



would assure me I could rest every night because all the hard work was up to nature's hand. Seeing Hiccup's dissatisfied expression whenever I gave it to you, worried me that he would succeed in convincing you not to take it...since yeh usually listen more to him than to anyone else. I had to be a lot more careful when I realized \_Valka\_ had started watching my every move. Luckily for me, I have tricks under my sleeve to keep her away for a while." takes in a deep breath, letting it go as slowly as ever, "The morning Hiccup first welcomed me into your new house, the mess of sheets on the floor and the uneasiness that escaped from his voice, made me understand that things went \_more\_ than just well between you two." Bertha giggles within, "Of course, I wouldn't expect you to \_know\_ if you \_believed\_ you couldn't bare children for a while."

"What is she talking about, Astrid?" Ruffnut asks,

"Well, Gothi surely already told you, I suppose you wouldn't mind me telling Ruffnut, right?" Bertha turns to Ruffnut. "She conceived, probably right after the wedding."

Then, it came to her. The memory of Astrid and Hiccup's morning after their wedding. When they woke up laying by the fireplace in the living room of their new home. She remembered that \_that\_ same morning, Bertha visited them with a basket loaded with herbs to combine and mix into a SnowBell tea—which was meant to block all ways of fertility in a man or woman. Astrid blinked in shock, "You \_planned\_ this?"

"Wow," Bertha scoffs, "You are awfully slow today, Astrid. And yes, all these years, I've actually had you wrapped around my finger."

"Those herbs you've been providing me with, they weren't what you said they were." Astrid says.

"Hm, close enough. If you \_must\_ know, " Bertha says, "You've been taking SnowBell, \_without\_ the SnowBell. Though, I admit I got quite alarmed when I heard you stopped consuming it and had been following some idiotic instructions from Gothi."

"Wait, what?" Ruffnut raises a brow, "Okay, I'm confused now. And if your target was Astrid all along, then why am\_ I \_even here?"

"Thought she could use the company." Bertha shrugs. "Good thing time has been kind to me." Looks back down at Astrid, tilts her head to the side, "I assume you haven't eaten anything all day long, right? Have you been feeling a bit dizzy lately? How about, \_short of breath\_ sometimes?" Leans her body back against the wall, "It hasn't been too long since you stopped taking the SnowBell. Which means—" "

"Exactly, what are you trying to imply?" Ruffnut heard herself ask.

"Wait for it..." Bertha said. "Shouldn't take long,"

As if she would have been controlling the events in time herself, Big Boobied Bertha's eyes filled with a sickening amount of pleasure when Astrid's body began to twist. Teeth caging her lower lip and pressing

hard enough to let her tongue taste the blood that came out of the flesh. Fists balled, arms pulling downwards. Shackles torturing her wrists, hurting the skin they covered. Eyes squeezed shut. Breathing, wasn't an option when her knees tried to move upwards, but the chains around her ankles brought them back down.

Bertha's lips spread into a thin smirk, "Come on, Astrid. Do not tell me you can bear this kind of pain."

"Mmhmm! Nhhgh!" Even though loud moans could be heard, no yelling escaped Astrid's tortured lips.

Bertha released a pleased laugh, "Oh, my! I have taught you well, haven't I? All those years of hardcore training weren't in vain. Impressive, how you actually manage to control the pain on your own when I know exactly what is going on inside you. Of course, I made sure things went the way I wanted them to."

"Stop it!" Ruffnut mumbled. Shocked by the image going on before her eyes. "Stop that!" Mumbles again. Eyes welling at the sight of her friend falling into an abyss of agony and not even daring to scream about it.

"I aint doing a thing." Bertha laughs, "The leech inside her is!" Pauses, "The faster it grows, the more it will hurt you." Warns Astrid.

"What have you been giving to her all these years, you bitch!?" She could care less if she disrespected a superior. Ruffnut, wasn't one famous for respecting others, anyway.

"That, is my secret to keep." Bertha carelessly responded, then glared down at Astrid, "Now yeh will know how I felt, when I learned I couldn't bare more sons. Every morning, day, and night, watching how Vincent gifted all of his attention to you and only you. How he always came home and the first thing that came out of his rotten mouth was 'where is my little Astrid?'. Countless times I tried to look at you with at least a tiny bit of care, but as the nights went by and yer father continued rejecting my body, I realized there was nothing more for me, but to face the facts and pretend to be nice for a while longer. The man that I was forced to marry turned his back on me and preferred the company of a brat instead! Now, how do you think I would feel?!" She yells out her last words. Her voice stormed against the walls that surrounded them, "You managed to defy my plans and go on with marrying a weakling when I wanted you to be torn apart by a much bigger man!"

"Don't you dare insult Hiccup in my face! He is much more of a man than what any other guy could ever wish to be!" Astrid couldn't help herself. It always steamed her up whenever her mother spoke of Hiccup with means only to throw mud at his name.

Years ago, Hiccup had become part of her family. He had been her friend. Even at times when she was far too angry to talk to anyone, he stayed close. He always knew when and how to talk to her-Even if at times, he would make a fool out of himself. Now, he was not only her best friend, but her husband as well. Lifelong companion, chief, and the father of her unborn child. Therefore, whenever someone dared to insult him at her face, she would take the insult towards herself as well.

"Right, I take it back." Bertha says, a hint of sarcasm in her tone, "The brave and intelligent Hiccup. Happy?" Pauses, then glares down at her, "He should have stayed far away the day you were meant to leave Berk."

By the sound of Bertha's last words, Astrid's vocal cords let out a gasp of disbelief. Her chest sunk. \_Thatâ€|that was why she was so upset when Hiccup found the compact hidden in a vase at the armory.â€\_she thoughtâ€\_Stoick knew she would be capable of anything in order to reach her goals. But, how could she?

Then, a moment came when Astrid could barely even hear Bertha speak. The twinge took over nearly all of her senses. Meanwhile, Ruffnut was chewing on her inner cheeks, seeing how Bertha walked around Astrid, watching how her pained daughter's body moved like a tapeworm.

\_Baby, please. Calm down\_â€Astrid thought. Trying to focus only in her thoughts as she intended to send her child words of comfort.â€\_My dear, child. Please, I know you can hear me even without words. Even if you are yet too small. You have to be strong. Let us be strong together, it's the only way we can get out of here.\_

Surprisingly for her, the muscles around her sides and hips relaxed. Her knees slowly fell and the air was fairly breathable.

\_Yes, we will get out of here\_â€she continues in her mind. Feeling deep in her heart, that her child was indeed, listening to her.â€\_We will get through this, together. And find your father. Once we see him, we will hug him and he will be incandescently happy to know you are there. Yesâ€|yesâ€| he, more than anyone, will be glad to know of your existence. I'm sure of it. \_

Seeing how Astrid's body laid exhausted on the stoned floor, Ruffnut sighed in relief. "Glad that's over." She mutters to herself. Her eyes then drifted back up to Bertha, "Hey, hag! Over here!"

Bertha's attention was brought back to the female twin. Who didn't even wait for her to speak, "You, are a disgrace. You don't even deserve the right to wear the Hofferson name. My mom is vastly ashamed of my brother and I and she is \_still\_ a better mother than you! Valka, has been absent from her only son's life for twenty years, and she \_is\_ a better human being than you could ever even try to be! Served Vincent right to die early so he wouldn't have to put up with your bullshit! I would have killed myself a long time ago if you were my mother, yet Astrid has fought all her life to prove herself to you and this is how you thank her?!" glances at Astrid, who's gaze remained down. Then looks back at Bertha, "Astrid is a woman of \_respect\_ and \_honor\_. She knows when to keep her mouth shut and maintain her posture in front of her superiors. But I don't give a damn of who you are! I will tell you what I know my friend would love to say but is \_educated\_ enough not to say it. Do you hear me?! I am glad Astrid gets to finally see who and \_what\_ you really are. That's right, you are demented, a whore, a liar! Your enjoyment in selling your soul to the devil will cost you and I spit on you Iâ€"

"Aaarg, enough already!" A male's voice flew into the cell as the

door opens and the muscular body of a not-so-tall man with spiky red hair, a scar across the corner of his lip, one that divided his right brow in half and spread down to his cheek and beard, and a striped blue tattoo on his left eye came in. Pistachio green eyes. Another blue stripped tattoo on his right arm-muscle. He wore a sleeveless armor and a furred black cloak hung from his left forearm.

"Dagur!" Astrid growled. "You too!?"

"Glad you remember me, beautiful." Dagur smirked as he closed the door behind him. "Surprised to see me? You didn't think I'd forget everything and just vanish from the globe that easily, huh?"

"You two teamed up!?" Astrid sent the question more to her mother. "The rumors, the letters, it was all a set up, wasn't it? A distraction to buy you time! To buy him time!"

"Our intentions linked." Dagur responded instead. "Turns out, that playing with the emotions may result much more entertaining than a murder."

"What do you mean?" Astrid asked.

"After all these years, I've come to the conclusion that killing brother Hiccup and taking his Night Fury won't please me as much as it would if I leave him untouched. The best kind of torture and punishment, is to keep your enemies alive. Let their own conscience lead them to the grave. You see, it won't take long for Hiccup to realize you aren't there. Therefore, he will come for you in his Night Fury. When he doesâ€" "

"And you seriously think Hiccup would fall for it?" Astrid cuts him off, "Years of meaninglessly chasing each other and you still haven't learned anything?" Frowns, "Hiccup won't let himself get tricked that easily. He has something you lack of, a brain!"

"Watch it, missy." Dagur growled, stepping closer to her. Unsheathing his sword and rubbing the tip between his thumb and forefinger. "The position you are in right now is a rather pulse quickening temptation. I would gladly give you real reasons to scream your lungs out. Right here, in front of your mouthful friend and mother." runs his fingers up her leg, over her knee and to her thigh. Laughing even more as he saw how she kicked her legs against his touch and growled like a mad beast at him.

Once his face was close enough to hers, droplets of saliva sprayed over his eyes and nose. Dagur growled, brought his hand up to her head and with a quick move, he pulled her headband off, wiped his face clean with the back of his other hand and then pressed the headband against his nose. "Mmm, such a fierce beautyâ€" oooh, "

Astrid's lips curled. Feeling like she could throw up at anytime as she watched him.

At least, spitting him got him to get his hands off of me.â€" She thought.

Dagur flicked his tongue and then glared back down at her while stepping away from her, "As much as I'd love to screw you myself,

unfortunately, I can smell brother Hiccup from a distance. Your whole body reeks of him. Makes me sick." shrugs, "Shame,"

"\_Good\_." Astrid says.

Dagur licks his lips, "Anyway, let me fill you in a little more on what's going on here, my dear Astrid and guy pal here."

"I'm a girl, you dimwit." Ruffnut mutters.

Dagur tilts his head to the side, "Really? Always hard to tell. Oh well! Once Hiccup hears that his precious lady has been captured, he for sure, won't hesitate to come and search for her. Better yet, I don't even have to lift a finger when I face him. Telling him that the love of his life died in a fight might hurt him and keep him with the agony for a few years, but learning that his \_unborn\_ \_child\_ also died with her, mm-hohoho, now \_that\_ will \_absolutely\_ kill him\_."

At the end of his words, Dagur released this unique kind of mocking-crazy-laughter that only made both Ruffnut and Astrid's ears ache with annoyance.

"Sounds like you have it all figured out. Did you know \_Toothless\_ won't wait this time to roast your ass up as soon as he sees you?" Astrid warned. "Again, how many times have you planned on getting onto Hiccup's back and then miserably fail?"

"Trust me, this time, it will work." Dagur says.

Astrid frowned, "I'd like to see you try and fail again."

"Think and say all you want." Dagur shrugged, "You are only useful to me until brother Hiccup comes. Get it? Hahahaaa! How does it feel like to be bait, \_again\_?" Scratches chin while looking down at her, "You know, now that I think of it, I'm really glad you defied Bertha's original plan and married brother Hiccup right away. That way I wouldn't have had to fake an attack on Osch's ship and then bring you here. No, no. This plan worked even better! I mean, look at this! Brotherâ€"

"Arg, \_zip it\_ already!" Ruffnut said, "Shit, your voice is torturing my ears! Tell us, what happened to Osch and Billus then?"

"Don't know, don't care." Dagur simply responded. "Osch followed my command and brought Astrid here." chuckles within, "Whatever happened to him after that, is not of my interest anymore." Tilts head to the side, "Though, I haven't heard from Billus yet,"

"\_I\_ killed him." Astrid spat. A hint of pride mixed up with the anger in her voice.

"Really?" Dagur grins, "Aw, so sweet of you. Thank you for saving me that part, beautiful. It would haâ€"

"Let me get this straight," Astrid cuts him off short. Glancing back at Bertha, "\_You\_ went through all that trouble, just to get me, so that \_he\_ could get his hands on Hiccup? Again, how stupid do you two think Hiccup is!?"

Laughing uncontrollably, Dagur turned his back to them and opened the cell's door. His disturbing laughter was heard even from afar as he walked away in joy. Bertha, followed shortly after. Halting her feet at the door when she heard Astrid's low growl call her name with a hint of repugnance in it, "Bertha."

Bertha's head turned. Glancing over her left shoulder and meeting the dark eyes of her chained daughter. She didn't even need to speak. Watching Astrid's bloody lips part, and her chest rise with the inhale of a deep breath, was enough to tell her how loudly her daughter was screaming of anger on the inside. "Hiccup, can take good care of himself. But if anything, and I mean anything, should happen to our child, your freedom, will be the price to pay."

"It's done, Astrid." Bertha calmly responds, "Remember that time when you yelled at all skies that you would rip all of your fertile insides out before ever giving Billus a son? Well, I then vowed that I would rip all of your fertile insides out before you ever gave Hiccup a heir."

Astrid's brows suddenly curled up. Her mind trying to picture the memory and find where Bertha stood back then. Was she there too? At the academy when Hiccup stepped in just in time to stop her from doing something completely reckless?

As if reading her mind, Bertha's lips formed a faint grin, "Yes, I was there. I heard you loud and clear. Believe me, that thing won't resist through it's second month." Turns around, giving her back to her daughter, whispering the last few words that had been waiting almost a lifetime to come out as she walked out the door, "â€"and neither will you."

Before Astrid would even think of ways to snap out of her own shock, Ruffnut snarled, "You won't get away with this." Digging her nails in her palms and shooting flames of fury from her eyes straight at Bertha Hofferson, "You are no one to command over her body, which is much stronger than what you think. You will pay for this! By my heel I swear you will pay with blood for this!"

\* \* \*

><p>"Aaaah! Slower!" Hiccup's yells rang through the entire Haddock home. The dinning table and couch had been pushed to a corner so that there would have been enough space to spread sheets and pillows on the floor. That's where Hiccup had been laid, after being injured in a fight. His right arm held back by Snotlout while his left arm was held back by Fishlegs.<p>

Shirtless. Exposing a long wound that went all the way down from his left inframammary region and ending a few inches over his bellybutton.

The hot needle sewing his skin back together was halfway finishing its duty, but the boy's squirming and screaming wouldn't make the job any easier.

"Would yeh stop moving like a drunk troll and stay still!?" Gobber complained, trying to pull the needle out and then back in.

Phlegma sat on Hiccup's other side of the bed. Wiping the blood with a humid towel that no more than five minutes ago, was a white one. Now, it was all crimson.

"Gothi, more saliva." Gobber said. Cutting the threads, tying them closed and moving aside to make way for the elder to step in.

Gothi held a bowl of dragon saliva in one hand, dug her free hand in and then palmed on Hiccup's half-closed wound.

Hiccup groaned within. Trying his best to bear the stingy feeling as she rubbed his torso.

"Drink more of this, son." Valka said. Bringing a bottle of rum to Hiccup's mouth once Phlegma moved away from him.

Hiccup hesitated, but he then moved forward just enough to trap the rim in his mouth and gulp down the bitter fluid that burned down his throat.

"Airg, quit weeping!" Gobber complainedâ€”again. Holding the needle in his good hand and sewing the boy. "I'm almost done, here."

"Geesh man," Snotlout said, still holding Hiccup's arm, "What kind of primitive beast did that to you?" glances at the wound, "That's not something an axe would do."

"It wasn't an axe." Gobber confirmed. Glaring down at the thread as he pulled the suture needle out, made a second single loop in opposite direction and finally squared the knot. Making sure everything was well closed and free of chances of reopening or getting infected.

"Then what was it?" Snotlout asks.

Phlegma waited for Gobber to move away so she could take his place near Hiccup. Holding a bigger bowl filled with clean water and a clean towel dipped in. She set the bowl by his feet, grabbed the towel, twisted it and then gently placed it on Hiccup's torso.

All the while, Toothless remained laying by the door, both paws over his head. Even though he didn't like the scene going on before his eyes, he still refused to leave his friend. He wanted to stay there and make sure everything went well.

"I saw it." Fishlegs said as he let go of Hiccup's arm and walked over to the dinning table where there were three piles of clean towels. "Hiccup was fighting a soldier when Toothless shot a plasma blast at him. Then, some kind of shadow dashed to Hiccup and all of the sudden, his flight suit was tore open and blood came out of his torso. Everything happened so fast!"

"Yeah, remind me again, how did we get away from all that?" Snotlout says.

Fishlegs shrunk his head in his shoulders, "After a while, the shadows simply disappeared and some warriors began to melt into black goo without the need to touch them. Then everything turned calm and quiet."

"Ei, tis' is the wound of a claw." Gobber said. Wiping his prosthetic scissor-hand clean.

"A claw?" Snotlout asked, "Didn't Fish-brain here just said that it was a shadow at super speed that did it?"

"Aye, but the real name to it would be a \_shapeshifter\_." Gobber said. "Those monsters probably got what they wanted and fled."

"And what did they want?" Tuffnut asked. "It's not like \_we\_ have so much to offer."

"I already have a few people searching for clues. I'll let you know as soon as I hear something that would help." Fishlegs said.

Feeling Hiccup's limbs get numb, Snotlout let go of him and went over to where Fishlegs stood. "Well, I'm glad my house didn't get burned down again. I'd hate it if I had to waste time rebuilding it. \_Again\_." Snotlout said.

"Good thing our enemies didn't get anywhere near Berk." Phlegma said. Twisting the blood-filled towel over the bowl's water, then placing it back on Hiccup's hips. "Dividing ourselves into groups all over the archipelago served as a protection barrier for Berk."

"Good idea indeed." Gobber agreed. He walked to the door and past Hiccup's friends, "You three, come with me. Time to broom out some corpses."

Snotlout's shoulders shook in disgust before he turned on his heel and followed Gobber out of the house. Fishlegs set the clean towels behind Phlegma and then silently followed Tuffnut.

Now, there were only five souls in the Haddock home. Gothi, who leaned against the wall while stirring a moist green paste in a plate; Phlegma, who made sure no red-stain remained on Hiccup's body as she finished rubbing the towel around his now closed wound; Toothless, who lifted his right paw to take a peek, hesitatingly moving closer to his rider; Valka, who now sat by Hiccup's other side and gently took his sweaty hand in hers; And of course, \_Hiccup\_—whose moans and groans soon got lost in thin air, and eyes struggled to stay open.

Valka then brought her other hand up to his messy hair. Brushing it backwards. Humming a song to comfort him and at least try to distract him from the pain.

Phlegma stood up, grabbed the bowl of red waters in her hands and walked to the kitchen.

Gothi went to stand close to Hiccup and then started to rub her hand on Hiccup's torso. Spreading the green paste all over it.

Toothless tilted his head to the side as he curiously watched what the Elder did to his best friend.

"A mix of medicinal herbs." Valka said. Having Toothless glance up at her. "It will not only make the pain bearable, but it should also allow him to heal faster."



Once finished, Gothi smiled in satisfaction, bowed her head at the chief and mother and then left the house.

"Mmn" Hiccup moans. Making both, Valka and Toothless look at him. His head slowly moved side to side. Brows contracting and relaxing.  
"Mn"nn

"Guur?" Toothless tilts his head to the other side.

"He must be dreaming now." Valka whispers. "Finally."

"Nnn"mm as"nn..As"trid"

Hearing him, Toothless' chin rested by Hiccup's numb arm.

"As"trid"mmn,"

Valka's hand continued brushing through his hair. As a result, Hiccup's brows relaxed for a few seconds before curling up again.

Even after the pain became completely bearable, allowing him to sleep for long hours, his lips continued allowing her name to escape"Every now and then. Dreaming of her. Calling for her.

In his dream, he was laying on his bed. In the Haddock home. His right hand resting on his bare chest.

Four fingers fall on his hand and move down to the gap between his fingers.

Soft, sweet and very much familiar lips gently pressed against his temple. Brushing down to his cheek, and landing on his lips.

His other hand rose from his side and buried his fingers in \_her\_ head. Getting lost in the loose golden curls that brushed against his bare chest.

Her lips then moved away from his. Emerald eyes found her sapphire gems. The hand in her hair moved slowly to her forehead, then down to her cheek. Rubbing his thumb on her cheekbone, when her figure began to fade.

Glaring, he moved his hand down to her neck. She ran hers up his arm as the color on her skin bit by bit became clearer.

Being able to see through her, his hand tried to take a hold of her shoulder, but it grasped nothing. Just then, her body disappeared and his eyes opened wide. Finding himself still laying on the living room of his house, sweating violently.

Head turns to the right. Toothless is sleeping soundly on the floor.

\_What a strange dream"\_"He thought. Just then, his mother walked in. Holding a tray in her hands.

Seeing him awake, she smiles, "Good, you woke up. I was starting to get worried."

Hiccup rose a brow, confused as he saw her sit down, facing him. When he glanced at the tray's contents, he saw a bowl of kale soup and a mug of water.

"Where is Astrid?" He asks. Not that he didn't like to see his mother tend to him, but the atmosphere around him felt odd. Empty. Something was missing. He didn't feel right and he certainly didn't like it.

Valka's frozen expression at the sound of Astrid's name made Hiccup furrow his brows, then relax again. He tried to push himself to sit up straight, but a sudden "light" sting on his stomach drove a groan out of him.

Valka quickly pressed a hand against his chest, to keep him from moving so much. "Hiccup, please, try not to make rough movements. The wound may reopen if you do."

"Gah, mom, where is Astrid?" He asks again. Swallowing the pain back down.

Valka sighed, "I will tell you everything you need to know. But you must promise me that you won't push yourself too hard."

Hiccup's eyes squeezed shut, swallowing loud again. "Mom, where is Astrid?"

Valka shakes her head, "The great hall has been turned into an emergency area where hundreds of injured warriors and shield maidens are being treated."

"Is Astrid hurt?" He hurried in.

Valka pouts at him for interrupting her. Then she just shook it off, "No one knows where she is. Dragon riders are still searching for survivors. Though, we did find Stormfly."

Toothless' ears perked up, but remembering last time he saw the Deadly Nadder, only made him lay his head back on his paws, facing the wall so Hiccup wouldn't see how sad he felt.

However, Hiccup noticed his dragon's reaction, "Whatâ€|what happened to Stormfly?"

"Shortly after you were back home, Toothless, Cloudjumper and I went to get water from the well, as Gothi directed. Toothless saw her spiraling down from the skies, struggling to free herself from a net." Pauses, "She hit the ground on her side and injured her right wing. She was treated, but we had to lock her in a pen because she wouldn't stop trying to run and fly away."

"She wants to follow after Astrid." Hiccup mumbled to himself.

"My thoughts exactly. Yet we can't let her do that until her wing is completely healed. Otherwise she could get harmed." Valka said.

"I have to see how she's doingâ€|a-a-ei Stormfly must be feeling really lonely now!" he hurries, "â€|And I have to find Astrid too."

"Hiccup," Valka stares coldly at him, "You can't push yourself while that wound is still fresh. Give it a few days. I trust Astrid will be alright. She is strong. You know this fact better than anyone, am I wrong?"

Hiccup's head fell backwards and his cheeks deflated as he released an exasperated sigh. Before he could manage to make something up to convince his mother, she hurried a spoonful of soup to his lips, "Eat up." she says.

"Uh, mom, thanks but, I'm honestly not hungry right now."

"Hiccup, if you truly want to heal fast and search for Astrid, then you must eat well." She says, "You've been asleep for almost a whole day and only Odin knows when was the last time you had a real meal."

\_Ouchâ€|Can't really argue with that\_â€"Hiccup thought, knowing that his mother wasn't very far from the truth.

Finally, his chest leaned a little forward and his mouth opened to let the spoon be guided in by his mother's hand.

\_Astrid, where are you?\_â€"he wondered.â€"\_Please be well. \_

"Say, Hiccup?" His mother's voice made him snap out of his inner prayer. Making him hum in response as he crewed on the small leaves of kale in the soup. "Hope you don't mind, I let Phlegma use the kale in a basket I found in the kitchen to make you this soup. It was starting to spoil."

Hiccup shakes his head, "Don't worry, Gothi gave that kale and other goods to Astrid."

"She did?" Valka asks. Looking out the window and spacing out for a quick second when Hiccup cleared his throat to catch her attention once again.

"Oh," he speaks, "There is another basket full of herbs. But those are the ones Astrid uses to make her SnowBell tea."

"Mmhm." Valka's suddenly changed tone alerted him. Her brows curled down and her hold on the spoon tightened.

"Uh, mom?"

She doesn't answer,

"Hey, mom." Hiccup calls again, this time a little louder.

She lifts her gaze back to him, "Yes?"

"You know something I don't." Hiccup's eyes peered into hers. Trying to read the meaning behind her sudden change of mood from calm, to completely absent.

"Sorry to interrupt," Phlegma's voice made both of their heads turn to the door. She released a quick chuckle of happiness, "Oh, Hiccup! What a joy to see you finally awake."

"You said I was out for a day?" He teases his mom. Faintly grinning, "Sounds like it was longer than that."

"Hehe, the rum sure knocked you out for a while." Valka responded. Glad the mood had changed into a more comfortable one. "Do you need help with something, Phlegma?"

Phlegma shakes her head, "Not quite. Fishlegs is here." Moving out of the way, a shaky Fishlegs hurried into the house. Holding a clip board in both hands.

"Fishâ€" "

"Hiccup!" Fishlegs cut Hiccup's greetings off short. "Um, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we've searched everywhere and out of all the missing vikings and sailors, four of them are really important to know right away."

"Who are they, Fishlegs?" Valka asks.

"Aside from Astrid, \_Ruffnut\_ and \_Eret\_ also appear to be missing." Fishlegs said.

"Ruffnut and Eret?" Hiccup asks.

Fishlegs nods,

"Is there a chance the three of them might be together?" Hiccup asks.

"Astrid and Ruffnut, probably. Though I'm not so sure about that since Tuff said that Ruff was taken away while they argued about something." Fishlegs responds,

"And what about Eret and Astrid?" Hiccup asks,

"No." Fishlegs says, "Witnesses say that Eret and Skullcrusher chased after something and then vanished."

"And who else is missing?" Valka asks,

Fishlegs hesitated for a bit. Seeing Hiccup's impatient gaze, Fishlegs licked his lips, "\_Bertha Hofferson\_."

\* \* \*

><p>The hours never before felt like they didn't even exist. For sure, at times, they would feel like they could freeze for a while, or even seem to be eternal. But we always knew that <em>they were there<em>.

Tonight, the hours only felt like they had also vanished from her own trust and confidence. There were many things she wanted to say. Many more insults to let loose from her bruised lips. Words, simply \_couldn't\_ come out.

Curious, how so much anger, disbelief and sadness all bundled up at once, were being held back by the wonders of it all just being a terrible nightmare. A nightmare that hopefully, will soon go

away.

What would a fellow's reaction be, if the one person you gave all your years of existence the hope of a possible hint of humanity in, turned out to want to dispose of you?â€"And for reasons you cannot even understand, or explain.

Naturally, some would allow their hearts to darken. With this, a hunger for revenge takes a tight hold of them. Craving to be respectedâ€"the hard way.

Others, seal their hearts into an impenetrable iron cage, thus they end up blind to all the other things that truly matter. Pushing everything and everyone away.

There are those, that cannot find a specific feeling to hold onto. Probably, because there is far too much good in them, that good itself, turns into a barrier that protects their hearts from any other feeling that would most likely have them think or do things they might later on regret. Thus, they fall in an abyss of absolute silence and empty thoughts. As if, fighting between negativity, \_and hope\_. Astrid, was one of those that couldn't find a specific feeling to hold onto. At least, \_not\_ \_now\_.

She wanted to scream her anger out. Break her hands free and then...and then...and thenâ€"\_what\_? What would come next? For once, she didn't know how to find the answer to her own troubles.

There was one thing that had been occupying most of the empty space in her mind ever since she met with Gothi that same day. \_The child\_. To think, that she had been used, was seriously disappointing. But, to know that an innocent creature was basically forced to come into this world for an ulterior purpose, sickened her more than any other fact.

"She's wrong," Astrid mumbled to herself. Unaware if Ruffnut was listening, or not. "I won't let her have her way. \_I don't know how\_, but I won't let her get away with this. My daughter, or son, will be living proof of my word."

\* \* \*

><p>"Watch your actions, Vincent. Odin will ban us if you risk too much." Stoick's finger shook up and down at his friend's direction as he sat by the looking-pool that allowed them view of everything they wished to see.<p>

Vincent, had his back to Stoick. Fixing his belt before he would walk to his right, grab a small bag from the floors and then look back at Stoick. "I must aid my daughter."

"Ei, Astrid is a very strong lass. Don't tell me yeh are daring to underestimate her." Stoick scolded.

"Never shall I dare show such idiotic behavior." Vincent said, "But she has a right to know some of the secrets hidden in the realms we are familiar with."

Stoick was about to object, say something that would convince his friend that he was risking his right to be in Valhalla, and be banned

to Hellhaim for becoming bore-headed. But Vincent rose his other hand out to Stoick, hushing him. "Stoick, my daughter has been unfairly betrayed. Driven far away from home, away from the only people that were always true to her. With a child that is fighting for its life inside her womb. She is suppressing her true feelings. You saw it yourself!"

Stoick released a loud "long" sigh. Nodding, he walked over to his old friend and rested both hands on his shoulders. "I know." pauses, "And I admit that if it weren't for us urging her to run away from Osch, she probably would now be here, hugging you and telling you how much she had missed you."

"It wasn't her time." Vincent whispers.

"No, it wasn't. And it still isn't. Those, are the small things we are allowed to do while up here in Valhalla. Watching over our dear ones, guiding their steps if needed. But we cannot go that far and violate the rules of the realms we know. It is a taboo to disrupt balance in life!" Stoick says.

"You misunderstand, I will not violate any rule." Vincent assures.

Stoick clicked his tongue, "And what is it you are about to do?"

"I wish to comfort her heart." Vincent answers, "That, shall be enough to restore at least a little more of the hope that was cruelly snatched away from her." Vincent's saddened eyes found Stoick's, "Stoick," Warm call, "What would you do, if it was your son chained to the wall like a wild beast and then stabbed in the back by someone he hoped to someday have a clean connection with? Then all of the sudden he realizes he was living a lie?"

Hearing him, Stoick's hands slowly fell from his friend's shoulders and hung on his sides. His eyes closed and his lungs allowed another deep exhale to escape. "The same." His voice was low, yet full of truth.

Vincent cleared his throat and pulled away from his chief. Turning his back to him and burying his hand inside the bag. He pulled a fist full of miniature green spheres and threw them at the distance.

A liquid portal was created. Revealing a sunny meadow on the other side.

Vincent's feet started to move forward when Stoick's voice halted him halfway to the portal, "Remember, only do the necessary\_."

Vincent's body then moved forward, being "I will," the very last words before he'd be sucked into the portal and taken to the other side.

Seeing the portal close, Stoick shook his head and allowed himself to release a quick chuckle, "Who'd ever imagine that the world we live in, holds so many secrets?" His feet guided him back to the looking-pool. He sat on the border and gently touched the water with his left forefinger. The image in the water changed from his reflection to what once was his and his son's house. In the living

room, where Hiccup laid on a bed of sheets. The boy's hand rested on the white bands that were recently wrapped around his torso to protect his wounds.

"Very well, old friend." Stoick says, "I will give you a fair hand."

## 21. Heart of Darkness

**\*\*Sometime in the Past\*\***

"Hear me now you dreadful beast! For I, Vincent Hofferson will never allow you to get away with our food!" Words spoken, an eight year old boy's feet jumped from a log and stood still on the ground. His right arm stretched out. Pointing his wooden-toy-sword forward. Narrowing his eyes at the black sheep that peacefully chewed on some grass.

"Prepare to die!" Vincent yelled, causing the sheep's eyes to widen as soon as she noticed the boy dashing toward her with an awfully determined expression.

The sheep made a quick jump and then started to run off.

"It's getting away!" Vincent said.

"Not for long!" Another boy said as he came in running from Vincent's right side.

This other boy, was more or less the same age as Vincent. He had a large horned helmet on his red haired head.

From Vincent's left, another boy came running. This one, had long blonde hair fixed in a braid that reached the middle of his back. "Let the arrows rain!" he yells, pointing his wooden-toy axe to the skies, "Aaaaauuuuu!"

"Gobber, you sound like a mad beast yourself." Vincent teased the other blonde.

"Funny, I thought that's what our parents often call us." Gobber laughed.

Soon, an arrow was shot at the three of them. Halting their feet as it landed right in front of them.

The red haired boy turned around and pouted at a girl holding a bow in her left hand as she stood at a considerate distance from them. "Phlegma, you were supposed to shoot the \_dragon\_, not us!"

Phlegma shrugged, "I saw something of more value than a dragon's heart." By the looks of her not so small figure, we could say that she was about nine to ten years old.

"And what may that be?" Vincent asked, curiously tilting his head to the right.

"Stoick's bum!" She quickly responded. Followed by a much louder laughter as she dropped her bow on the ground and walked up to

them.

Stoick's serious stare remained as he watched her get closer. "Is that any way to speak to your chief?"

"You ain't my chief yet." Phlegma said.

"Hehe, even if he were the chief, his bum really is much more valuable than a dragon's heart." Gobber agreed.

"Shut it Gobber! Yer not helping at all!" Stoick hissed. Throwing his shield at Gobber—who ducked before it got him.

"There goes our badge of honor!" Vincent mumbles as he watched how their dragon—which was actually a black sheep—continued running further away.

Stoick's hand rested on Vincent's right shoulder, "We will get another chance."

Vincent was about to say something when a rather slim—seven year old—girl with long dark brown hair fixed in a ponytail came running up the street. She waved her left hand up in the air to have them notice her, "Come! Quick!"

"Valka," Phlegma said, "What is it?"

Vincent suddenly began bouncing on his heels "Did you catch the sheep?" Shakes head, "I mean, dragon?"

Valka rose a brow at him, "What?" pants, shakes head, "No! I come from the docks. A new ship just anchored here."

\* \* \*

><p>Many people gathered at the docks to welcome their new guests. Down the ramps of a large ship, descended a very tall and buff man of dark curly hairs. His expression was stern and unfriendly. Behind him, followed an elder woman. Her way down the ramp was being supported by a small girl—who held her hand.<p>

The girl of dark hairs fixed in two braids resting over her shoulders didn't look up to anyone that greeted her. She wore beige trousers and a matching long-sleeved tunic. Over her shoulders, rested a beige colored fur cloak.

"Who on Jill's beans is that?" Gobber whispered to his friends.

All four kids hid behind a stack of wooden boxes near port. Poking only their heads out. Watching everything going on before their eyes. Stoick was in the middle. Vincent to his right, Gobber to his left. Valka to Gobber's left and Phlegma to Valka's left.

"Stoick, did your father mention anything about leaders of other tribes visiting us?" Phlegma asks.

"Not that I remember." Stoick responded.

"Well, whoever that is, she ain't looking happy." Phlegma said.



Pushing her chin forward as to gesture at the girl.

"Maybe she isn't the friendly kind." Valka said. "We should ask her to play with us."

"\_Play\_?" Gobber coughed a chuckle out, "Since when do Vikings \_play\_!? That is ridiculous! We haâ€" "

"That's," Vincent interrupts him, "Not a bad ideaâ€"|" looks up at Valka, "\_You\_ ask her then!"

"What!?" Valka's eyes widen. "Why!?"

"It was \_your\_ idea." Vincent says, then shrugs and looks back at their guests, "Besides, girls understand each other better than boys do, right? Should be easy for you."

Valka's cheeks inflated and her nose looked like it had been pushed out by her disappointment. She sat back and crossed her arms over her chest, "No way. I don't want to."

Stoick moved to crawl toward her and sat in front of her. Tilting his head to the side and with a shy voice, he said, "I will go with you," clears throat, "If \_you\_ like\_, of course."

Valka looked up at him, hesitated for a few seconds, and then silently nodded. Standing up, she waited for Stoick to finally realize the answer she had given him so he'd stand up too and walk with her to the girl that now was standing just a few long feet from the pile of wooden boxes they were using as a hiding spot.

What seemed to be the girl's father, was listening to directions given by one of the local sailors.

Stoick stepped closer to them first and waved his hand at the girl. "Hello. My name is Stoick." offers his hand out to her, "Welcome to Berk."

The girl didn't answer. She just stared blankly at his hand that still waited for her to take.

Seeing how she wouldn't take his hand in, Stoick retrieved it and scratched his chin to avoid some of the embarrassment when Valka stepped in and gifted the girl a tiny smile.

Before she would even think of how to spell her own name out, Stoick quickly pointed at her and said, "This is Valka."

Valka frowned at him. Sending him a straight glare that clearly yelled\_ I know how to introduced myself.\_

Stoick just shrugged in response.

The girl didn't greet Valka. She didn't even bother to look at either of them. She just remained in silence. Having the other two kids feel undoubtedly uncomfortable as they shared a confused glance.

"Let's go, Bertha." The elder lady that came with them gently rested her hand on the girl's back and gave her a light push forward. "Time to meet the chief."

"The chief!" Stoick quickly said, "That's my dad."

Hearing him, the girl whose name now they knew was Bertha, glanced back at him, eyed him from helmet to boot and then continued walking.

"Was it me or did she just check you out?" Valka said.

Stoick brought his shoulders back, pushed his chin up in pride and stretched his lips in a very wide smile as his knuckles rested on his hips. "Well, a man this handsome cannot be ignored for that long."

Valka clicked her tongue at him, "Seriously?" Crosses her arms over her chest, "Don't you think it's a bit strange that she only looked at you after you said that you were the chief's son?"

Stoick blinked at her, "So?"

Valka shook her head, "Never mindâ€|"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Years Later<strong>

Snowy evening.

Chopping cabbage into smaller chunks, Bertha's attention was brought to the door when it suddenly opened and her husband walked in. Holding a large closed sack over his right shoulder.

Vincent kicked the door closed and dropped the sack on the dinning table. "Add this to tonight's menu, will ya?"

Bertha nods, "What did you catch this time?"

Vincent sat on a chairâ€"facing Berthaâ€"and sent her a proud grin, "Elk."

"Mm, not bad." Bertha said.

Vincent chuckles, standing up and walking up to his wife. Gently resting a big hand on an eight-month big baby bump. "Our baby will love it."

Bertha's hand moved his to a low-left side of her bumpâ€"where she felt the movement going on at the moment. Showing most of her teeth in utter enthusiasm, she says, "I cannot wait to have this baby in my arms! Almost every night, I dream of him."

Slightly taken aback, Vincent blinks back at her, "Him, you say?"

But as if she wasn't even listening to him, she kept on, "How do you think he'll look like? Oh, I wish for him to resemble you the most!"

Pulling away from her, Vincent took in a deep breath and turned his back to her. Running his fingers down his beard as he paced forward

and then sat back on one of the chairs in the dinning room.

Noticing how he didn't share her enthusiasm, Bertha tilts her head to the left. "What's the matter?" Steps closer to him.

By the time Vincent looked up to find her, Bertha was already only two feet from him. "Do you wish for a boy above all other matters?" he asks.

"What is more important than a good heir?" Her tone almost mocking.

"A girl may be perfect for that job as well." Vincent responds. "Don't you think?"

Bertha scoffs. Resting both hands on her belly and leaning her shoulders back to release an even louder laughter, "If I ever have a girl, then I will have her become a strong shield maiden, yes. But she won't inherit all of our goods. Over my dead body, she will."

Hearing this, two massive hands slammed against the table. Making the empty mugs waiting to be filled fall over and the bagged elk give a slight move. "Enough," the man stood up from his seat. His eyes squeezed shut in annoyance. "Is having wealth all that truly matters to you? Whatever happened to wanting a family? I have grown sick of hearing you say the same thing over and over for the last eight months. Never said a word about it, for I always hoped you would one day change your mind and accept whatever will come with joy." When his eyelids uncovered his eyes, they revealed a pair of pale blue gems that had flamed up with fury. "I would throw all of our goods to the depth of the ocean if having a girl means so little to you. A person, is a person. Just because our society grants much more attention to a man's potency, does not mean a woman is less valuable. Was I the only one desiring for a family?"

Feeling as if he dared say more, he might lose his control, Vincent turned on his heel and began walking to the door.

"What has gotten into you now?" She asks.

"Constant questions about your true intentions with my child concern me." He flatly responds.

"What?" She lowly growls, "Yeh speak as if this baby only belongs to you."

Turns halfway to her, pointing a long forefinger at her. Having her stop from getting any closer. "If you continue speaking like you only have specific intentions with it, then I will have no other choice than to do everything in my power to keep it far away from your grasp. I will not have yeh turn him or her into a puppet for yer own benefit."

Seeing how her body had practically frozen in time after hearing his unusually storming tone, Vincent dropped his finger and both of his shoulders relaxed. Releasing a loud sigh, he somehow then managed to keep his tone at a considerate volume, "Listen, Bertha. I only wish for a progenitor that I could give love to. The kind of care my father and mother could never show me and my brother as we grew

older, for they were always too busy assisting the chief. Whenever the chief had to go on a diplomatic voyage, my parents also left with him. Whenever we were at war, my parents never hesitated in stepping forward. At first, Finn and I thought that they were invincible in battle. They always found their way back home. But one day, they \_didn't\_."

There was a long gap of silence between them. Bertha wanted to say many things in return, but she didn't seem to find the correct words to describe everything going on in her head. It was then, when Vincent took in a deep breath and without even bothering to look back up at her, he said, "Humbly, I only seek for \_my child's happiness\_. Inheritance and power will come in later."

As if being shaken by Helheim herself, Bertha snapped out of her own barriers and backed one step, "How can you say something like that?! Our son can be the chief of this tribe if we work hard enough for it. Or we can marry him to a princess if we train him adequately. We can evenâ€" "

"Have you not listened to a single word I just said!?" Vincent shakes his head. Hoping that his ears were playing tricks on him. But apparently, they were not. Bertha had definitely been blinded by \_greed\_ itself.

Unable to keep his voice at a normal tone much longer, Vincent snapped, once again pointing a long forefinger at her, "Now you listen to me, Bertha from the Bog Burglars. \_Stoick\_ the Vast's \_eldest\_ son will be chief when he reaches maturity. \_Hiccup\_ Horrendous Haddock the Third\_. Not ours! If we have a daughter and she marries him, then it \_better be\_ because they love each other and not because of a cursed agreement between both families for some sick alliance. If we have a son and he \_wants\_ to be a shepherd, then I will have the biggest field be his if he so desires! I will never allow my offspring go through the same hell I did and I forbid you to ever move a finger against their will!" Steps closer, only inches from her. "Do you hear me?!"

Her eyes narrowed. Both of her palms pressed against his chest and pushed him away from her already invaded personal space, "So you expect us to live in poverty and misery!?" She asks, "My father would have never allowed our marriage if he knew this would happen."

"Yer father, wanted you to marry \_Stoick\_." Vincent said, "Do you remember what happened the day you first came to our grounds?" grins daringly at her as he watches her walk further away and gift him her broad back. "\_Do you\_?"

"Hush it." She says.

"Well then, allow me to clear the skies for you my dear!" takes in a deep breath and lets it go tangled in with rough words that were sent right at her backside like hot knives. "Your father insisted to make an agreement with the chief to have \_you\_ and \_Stoick\_ get married once you reached the appropriate age. As an \_act of peace\_ between the Bog Burglars and the Hairy Hooligans even if your father was actually banned because the Bog Burglars, is no more and no less than a tribe of only female Viking warriors. But our chief didn't agree to a contract that soon. He wanted to wait until Stoick reached maturity and gave him the last word. Unfortunately for you and yer father,

Stoick was already interested in \_Valka\_. Seeing how the chief considered his firstborn's choice above all else, your father then insisted in having you wed a man that stood almost at the same level of the chief." Leans back, both arms stretched to the sides as he then spoke the following with a hint of sarcasm dripping from his lips, "And who better than the Captain of our troops!? Heir of a very considerate amount of gold and \_the biggest fool\_ of the Hairy Hooligans for thinking that one day, you might grow to actually \_like him\_ the way he has liked \_you\_ all these years!"

"Hush, I say!" She mutters. Clenching her jaw and balling her hands into fists.

"No." Vincent frowns, "I still have one more thing to say to you." His hand found her shoulder. Turning her to him, leaning his face closer to hers, whispering words mixed in low growls, "That greed that flows through your veins, will \_not\_ reach my child's spirit. If you as ever so \_try\_ to use my child as a marionette for your own benefit, then I will be the first one to vote in favor to have your neck hung." pauses, "Have I made myself clear?"

The disappointment in her eyes gave him the answer he was expecting. Without any other word spoken, Vincent turned his back to her, opened the front door and walked out of the house. Slamming it behind his back.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>About Three or Four Months Later<strong>

For centuries, time has had the power to \_mend\_ broken hearts. To \_distract\_ bothersome thoughts. To \_heal\_ wounds. To make the ghost of our past \_go away\_.

There hasn't been enough generations to step up for their rights and change the patterns established by our ancestors. At least, \_not yet\_.

Born from a woman that fought against her own village's rules to keep the man she loved nearby. At least, until her child reached her sixth year of age. Which was enough time to teach the child the differences between a man's love and that of a woman's. Both similar, yet both so different. One, disguised itself as over protection. The other, as discipline.

It was a scandal. The chief's youngest daughter had gone against the rules of their tribe. Instead of sailing to neighboring tribes to take away a man's seed and give birth to what will one day become warriors that will bring down their enemies, her eyes got lost in those of a stranger that had filled her mug of fresh red wine about three to four times that first night at the tavern.

When her mother heard of the rumors of her youngest daughter hiding a man in an abandoned cabin deep into the forests, the young lady was already bearing a child in her womb.

The Bog-Burglars' chief ordered the man to leave. For it was against the rules of their tribe to have men wandering around \_unless\_ they were part of a visiting tribe. The man refused. Steamed by his bold behavior, the chief gripped on her axe, drew her arm back over her

head and right before she would bring her hand back down on the man's body, her daughter stepped between them.

Begging her not to kill him, the youngest daughter offered anything that might be of interest to the chief. Considering the offer, her mother agreed to have the unborn child's father close by but only until the child's sixth birthday. In return, the youngest daughter had to give in her half of the inheritance and never again claim her place as one of the chief's daughters.

It was a fair pact. To them, the name of their tribe had been stained. Someone had to pay the price for it.

But things didn't exactly turn out the way the young lady hoped they would. Having a man in a tribe full of only women, brought more troubles not only to her, but to the chief as well. Rumors spread, that this man spent most of the nights at taverns. What did he do during his time of countless mugs of mead and wine? No one knew. Rumors say that he sold information and secrets about the Bog Burglars to their enemies.

Both, the young pregnant lady and her lover tried to run away several times. But it was especially hard to sneak out on the guards. Also, the ships were all tied together to avoid being stolen so easily.

As time went by, both lovers got used to living through their part of the deal. The child was born. A lovely baby girl.

For the first time in the history of their tribe, a child was being raised by both the mother and father.

Although time was being kind to the child, the father grew sick and tired of the misery they were in. On winter, the food in their hut was limited for it wasn't enough to satisfy three Viking stomachs. So the mother tried her best to make sure their child had her meals without any trouble. Of course, she would have rather starve herself to death before leaving her daughter without something to eat. But the husband didn't share that thought.

Every night, he would speak of how better things would have been if she speaks with her mother and arranges a trip to another tribe. For matters of alliance. That way, chances of gaining a fair amount of goods would increase.

But the wife refused. She spoke of how happy she was with only the fact that she had a child to care for. She wasn't interested in gold, or silver.

Unable to remain calm, the husband lost his control and warned her of her actions. For they would bring her to the end of her days.

Frightened by the threat, the wife silently waited for time to mark her daughter's sixth birthday, and disappeared.

You could be the strongest warrior in all the world. Fearless, without a doubt. But when someone that means so much to you treats you so violentlyâ€"even with just wordsâ€"then all of that strength that once belonged to you feels as if it was never even yours to hold. At first, you don't know what to do, or how to react. Some are

fast in recovering their senses. Others delay a bit longer. But this kind of behavior, is always truly unpredictable.

By the time the youngest daughter left, the chief had given her place to the eldest daughter. The father tried one last time to convince the child's grandmother to let him leave. This time, the former chief accepted. But with the only condition that she was to accompany them and make sure her granddaughter earned the kind of fortune her mother threw away.

They waited until the girl was eight years of age, when they arrived the Hairy Hooligan's tribe.

Time went back to its original course when Bertha Hofferson found herself standing in front of her newborn child's crib. Remembering the past that haunted her thoughts on most of her days.

There was a baby in the crib. Sleeping. Resting the back of its right hand on its red nose. Wrapped in a soft green blanket with a brooch that read the name 'Astrid'.

Bertha's eyes were sharp down at the child. No doubt, she had been utterly disappointed when they came to her with a girl instead of a boy. But that didn't stop her from managing to think of otherâ€"and better\_â€"ways to regain the riches and honor she so much desired.

"I'll make a true warrior out of you." She mumbled.

Seconds later, the baby began to whimper. Kicking her tiny legs and waving her arms as she opened her mouth and emitted loud cries.

Hearing her, Bertha turned her back to her and walked away. "We'll begin by teaching you how useless tears are\_ to me." Just then, the hut's front door opened and Vincent Hofferson came in. Carrying a baby boy that clearly looked a few months older than the baby girl.

"Oi, why do I hear my girl's cries all the way across the street?" Vincent says. Stepping right in front of her, the boy in his arms peeked into the crib. Seeing the girl still crying to the top of her lungs.

Two big hands slid under the boy's armpits and took him from Vincent's arms.

"Stoick, what surprise to have you here." Bertha said as she poured some yak milk on three mugs.

"Hope it is not too much trouble, Bertha." Stoick says, "Thought I could come and visit for a while when I saw Vincent on the way."

Vincent had already managed to pick the baby girl up in his arms and slowly rock her as he rubbed his big fingers on her small back.

"No trouble at all." Bertha said. Offering him a mug. "It is always an honor to have you around."

He shifted the boy to one arm as he took the mug with his other hand. Mumbling his gratitude before sipping from it and then bringing the mug to the boy's lips. The boy tried to grab the mug. But his hands were still too small. So he just patted it as he drank from it.

Astrid's cries had finally gone off as Vincent whispered a soft lullaby to her and walked to stand behind Stoick.

Stoick turned to face Vincent and smiled brightly at them. "Ah, she takes a lot after you, old friend." His eyes move from Vincent, to Astrid. From Astrid to Vincent, then he laughed, "Although I believe she'll be much more beautiful in a future." Pauses to mutter the last more to himself, "\_Hopefully\_..."

Vincent shot a quick glare at him before noticing how curiously the boy in Stoick's arms watched his daughter.

Astrid still had her eyes closed. But the constant movement of her fists against his tunic gave him the thought of her still awake. She took in quick breaths every now and then. When her eyes finally opened, they revealed a quite dark color. It wasn't green, or blue, or gray. It was...more like an \_evening dark\_.

The boy in Stoick's arms laid his head on his dad's shoulder while still silently gazing down at the girl. He stretched his lips to smile at her, but she only blinked back at him in what seemed like utter curiosity.

\_No one ever imagined, that those two pair of innocent eyes, were the ones meant to change the future...\_

## 22. The Dream

**\*\*Present Time\*\***

Barefoot. Toes burying in soft, shamrock grass. Pure air went into her nostrils and filled her lungs. Eyes taking their time to open as the wind gently pushed the small of her back to walk further. Encouraging her to wander free in the meadow. The breeze that caressed her rosy cheeks and blew her braid back was cool, yet the sunlight felt warm against her skin.

One hand moved to rest on what now felt like a small bump. The other soon followed and the bump now felt the warmth of both of her hands. Her feet moved forward, sapphire eyes exploring every detail that surrounded her.

The trees were stunningly leafy and streams of crystal clear waters allowed the swimming fish to be seen from a simple glance.

Astrid, was wearing a white, V-necked, long-sleeved dress. A dark blue belt with a bronze dragon emblem hugged her waist. Though the dress reached her ankles, the wind still managed to play with itâ€”and her sleeves. Her hair was brushed into a braid over her right shoulder, and her bangs danced over her eyelashes.

A Tiger Swallowtail butterfly caught her attention as it flapped its wings past her face, over her head, around her shoulders and then



gracefully standing on a hand she had brought up for it.

The butterfly's wings slowly fell, then rose again. But it didn't move from Astrid's finger. Its tiny feet tickled against her skin, making Astrid's lips spread into a curious smile as she admired the insect's details. Just then, the butterfly jumps from Astrid's finger and flies away.

"Astrid."

A deep male's voice coming from a little far behind her made her body slightly turn. Spotting the figure of a buff man with blonde hairs brushed into a braid-tail that reached his middle back. A mustache covered his upper lip and his beard reached his neck. He wore a dark silver tunic, dark trousers and a black furred cape over his broad shoulders. Over his head, instead of a Viking helmet, rested a thin silver crown with a Triquetra engraved on its front.

As she walked closer to the figure, enough to be able to see its facial features more clearly, she noticed that he had the most beautiful pair of pale-blue eyes she had ever seen before.

Surely, she had seen a lot of blue eyes before. But none like these. No, these were shining with something special. Even though she hadn't seen them in years, to her, it felt like it was yesterday when she last saw them. Well assured of who this man was, she says, "Father,"

Vincent Hofferson's expression relaxed. Stretching his hand out to her.

Astrid's hand found his. Then, she was pulled into a tight embrace. Her feet were lifted from the ground and soon she found herself laughing at the feeling of her body being spun with her father's like a little girl enjoying a day at the park with her dearest father.

When her feet touched the ground once again, she pulled back and his other hand found her cheek. She noticed that his eyes started to well while his thumb rubbed her cheekbone.

Then, it hit her. Astrid's joy seemed to instantly fade away as her hand found the wrist of the hand that still caressed her, and held it. "Wait, am I in Valhalla?"

Vincent released a slight chuckle, then shook his head in denial, "No, my dear."

She raises a brow, "Then, a dream?"

Vincent's nod sent shivers of relief down her spine, "Good. I have to do a lot of things before I even get anywhere close to Valhalla."

"Heh, I am sure you do." He agrees. Pulling his hand from her face and then extending it to the side, offering her a walk together. "Shall we?"

Astrid nods, taking a hold once again from his other hand. They

strolled at a slow pace. Caring much less of time. Simply enjoying the calm atmosphere that embraced them.

"There are so many things I'd like to ask," She says, "And many more to share."

"I understand how you feel." Vincent says. "You were four when I left. You might want to tell me stories about your journeys and all the troubles you and your friends caused during your teenage years."

Astrid's head pops up in amaze, "How'd yo guess!?"

As a result, Vincent released an amused laugh, making her pout at him. "What's so funny?"

"Hehehe, you look like a child when you get excited." He says.

She shrugs.

"Speaking of," Vincent stops their stroll and stands in front of her. Hesitantly moving his hand to her small bump. Astrid's smile of approval gave him the \_go's\_ to rest his big palm there. "Congratulations," He ads.

She took in a deep breath while looking down at his hand on her, "In real life, I have no bump." chews on the corner of her lower lip, "I can't seem to understand whether this is a really nice dream or a trick from Loki. Making me see things that aren't real."

"The child \_is\_ real." Vincent assures. "It is a gift from Freya and Frigga."

"How should I know if that's true?" Astrid asks. Absently placing her other hand on her bump's side. "All I've been feeling lately is my breath being taken away from my lungs every once in a while, forcing me to fear something is wrong with me. Then I learn that my body has been treated like a puppet and the child I know I would have loved to welcome \_one day\_ in a further on future" is suffering. How is that a gift? If it wasn't because Gothi said I was with child, I would have never allowed the thought to cross my mind. And still, I believe her news came to me far too late."

"Astrid" Vincent lifted his hand from her bump and cupped her chin, binging it up so she'd meet his eyes. "All the ache you have been forced to go through all this time, does not take away the reality that a precious treasure is being safely kept in here."

"\_Safely\_?" She repeats in a whisper disguised in doubt that got lost with the wind.

"Yes. \_Safely\_." He assures, "Your body is very much stronger than what you give it credit for and you should give it a chance to convince you of such." Seeks the shining of her iris, "Say, you \_do\_ have hold of my dagger?"

She nods, "I do. Apparently, they didn't search \_everywhere\_ for weapons. Not even Dagur or my mother thought of taking my shirt off or at least tap their fingers over my torso just in case." Slightly

confused by the sudden change of subject, then she released a quick chuckle, "Which makes them look really simpleminded considering all the trouble they went through to create that kind of trap for Hiccup." Rolls eyes, "â€\_Idiots\_" mutters more to herself.

"Good, then." Vincent pulls back and lets go of her chin. Continuing to walk with her. "I wish for you to keep that dagger close to your heart. Remember the true meaning of power and strength, no matter what happens next."

As Astrid and Vincent strolled together, enjoying the unusual opportunity to meet in the Realm of Dreams, the wind guided a trail of brown leaves to a far end. The leaves formed a small whirlwind that soon revealed the shape of a slim young man of auburn hairs, and a prosthetic left leg.

Both of his hands instantly touched all over his chest. Feeling how even though there were stitched wounds hidden by white bands that wrapped his torso, he didn't feel any pain or difficulty to breathe. His clothes were far different than what he was used to. He was wearing shortbread-yellow trousers and a long-sleeved white V-necked tunic. A maroon belt with a bronze dragon emblem around his waist. His good leg wore a light-brownish boot.

The brown leaves that danced around him caught his attention. Following them with his sight as they made him turn around. Just then, the trail of leaves were driven away. His eyes spotted two figures afar. A woman, and a much older man.

As the wind gently pushed him toward the two figures, his feet were forced into a drastic halt when he recognized the female cheerfully walking by the stranger's side. His eyes wouldn't believe what they were seeing, until the man by her side stopped their continuous pacing and moving his head at the boy's direction.

Astrid turned to where her father encouraged her to look. Gasping at what her eyes were showing her, her feet couldn't wait for her brain's permission to move, as they were already taking her closer to the young man.

About five feet from each other, Hiccup gave one step closer. "Astrid," He whispers.

To him, she looked \_just like the last time he saw her.\_ The only difference in her, was the unusual clothing she wore.

It was one of the rules of the Realm of Dreams. If one was conceded the privilege to communicate to another through the Realm of Dreams, then the message would be \_limited\_ to what was\_ truly necessary\_. Since Hiccup wasn't aware of Astrid's stage, he couldn't see the bump Vincent saw. And since Astrid wasn't aware of Hiccup's injury, she couldn't see the white bands around his torso through the thin layer of his tunic.

She closed the short distance between them. Slowly bringing her hands up his arms, over his shoulders and finally pull him into a hug. "Hiccup," She whispers.

His fingers crawled up her hips and met on her lower back. Closing her in his arms as his cheek gently pressed with hers and his lips

parted to make way for words that only brushed against her earlobe, "Tell me, where are you?"

Her lips moved to release her answer, when a rough wind made it difficult for her to think of the kind of words that one should use. As if someone was controlling her words, all she could manage to say was, "I don't know."

As if that same wind that made it difficult for her to say the words she actually wanted to spill, also had control over his own words, Hiccup's voice didn't release any other question. It felt as if they were being blocked out. All he could do, was keep her close for a few more seconds.

Astrid pulled away from him. Running a hand through his hair, looking deep into his eyes. Stretching her lips into a sweet smile.

"I hope this dream lasts a while longer." He whispers.

"We will meet again, soon." She assures.

Hiccup's right hand found her cheek, and she leaned to his touch. "No matter where you are, I will find you. Please don't doubt on that." He says.

Closing her eyes as she brought her hand to meet his over her cheek and held it there for a bit more.

A big hand suddenly rested on Hiccup's shoulder, making him slightly turn to meet a figure that caused his eyes to widen.

Stoick The Vast stood right behind him. Looking as calm and proud as he remembered. Wearing a crown forming a Triquetra instead of a Viking helmet over his head. His robes were the same as Vincent's, with the only difference that Stoick wore a much hairier black cloak over his shoulders.

"Dad!" Hiccup exclaimed, not really helping it.

Stoick snickered as he heard him. "Hello, son."

Hiccup was about to say something when Vincent cleared his throat aloud and glared up at the skies, "Time is running." He says.

"What, but Hiccup and Stoick just got here." Astrid said.

"Worry not," Stoick speaks, "We will always be close to you."

"When the time comes," Vincent speaks, "and you are gifted another opportunity like this one, then we will explain to you the rules of the Realm of Dreams."

"Rules?" Hiccup asks, tilting his head to the side and raising a brow.

"Yes, rules." Stoick said.

Vincent took Astrid's hand from her side and brought it up to his lips. "Farewell, my dearest daughter."

Stoick's hand—which still rested on Hiccup's shoulder—turned Hiccup so he'd face him completely. "Son, good luck."

Before Hiccup or Astrid could bring themselves to respond to their father's words, Stoick turned Hiccup to face Astrid and her father once again.

Vincent guided Astrid's hands to Hiccup's direction and with his other hand, he took Hiccup's. "I could never wish for a man with a purer heart than yours, to form part of my only daughter's life." joins their hands, "No matter the circumstances, trust time. Learn to be patient, for everything happens with a reason hidden behind. That way, your hearts will find the way to each other."

With the joining of their hands by Vincent Hofferson, Hiccup and Astrid's fingers intertwined. Their eyes piercing one another as the now gentle wind danced around them.

Gradually, their faces moved closer. Eyes closing, her lips gently locked his lower lip. His lips chased after hers. Hers then brushed against his, side to side until he pushed his lips against hers.

The dream then began to fade away. Being Astrid's eyes the ones that open first and meet the stone that surrounded her. Her head moved to the side. Seeing Ruffnut laid on her back with an arm thrown over her eyes, mouth dropped open and heavy drops of saliva that fell from it.

Her loud snores made Astrid release a quick inner laugh and then look away. Gazing up at the ceiling. Thinking of nothing but the most beautiful dream she has had in her life—for now. "Heh, feels like I just remarried him. Only this time, it was in front of our fathers."

Lightheaded, her eyes began to feel unusually numb.  
"Felt—nice—"

Everything around her suddenly seemed to spin, just then, everything went pitch black.

\* \* \*

><p>Back in the Haddock home, Hiccup's eyes opened as he left the dream that made his whole body feel incredibly light. Remembering it, brought a smile across his lips. "Feels like we got married, again." pauses, "and in front of our fathers, no less."<p>

"Guur?" Toothless' growls made Hiccup turn to glance at the Night Fury that laid on his side.

"A dream." Hiccup responded. Sighing aloud as he gazed up at the ceiling, "A wonderful dream—"

Hiccup's elbows pushed his torso upwards as he managed to sit. Toothless immediately stood on his four paws and growled in concern at his rider.

"Don't worry, bud." Hiccup says, taking in quick deep breaths to settle the uncomfortable feeling on his body. "It doesn't hurt as

much as it did last time. Seems like the dragon saliva and medicinal paste Gothi applied are doing their thing." Shakes head, "Anyway, we have to hurry up and get out of here. Astrid might be in trouble."

Toothless pouted at him.

Knowing exactly what his dragon meant, Hiccup snickered, "Hey, I won't make it worse. I promise." pets him, "But I really need to get out of this bed. My back is already bothering me."

Toothless kept the straight face.

Hiccup playfully mimicked his dragon's face. "Don't look at me like that, what would you do if you were in my place? Huh?!" teases.

Toothless huffs within and turns his head away.

Hiccup pouted down at him. Then clicked his tongue as an idea popped into his head. Hoping it would work on Toothless' protective mood, "How about, we go pay Stormfly a visit before leaving town?"

Toothless' ears perked up at the sound of the Deadly Nadder's name.

Seeing him, Hiccup rose a brow, then started to affectionately rub Toothless' chin. "Ah, I see now. So you do miss her, don't you? And you haven't seen her because you've stayed taking care of me?"

Toothless' eyes fell in sadness and a low moan escaped him. Not even Hiccup's rubs would relieve him from the guilt he felt for not being able to be in two places at a time. Probably, if Stormfly was near the Haddock home, he would gladly come and go. But she was transferred from the pen, to the cabin that was made for Hiccup and Astrid to live in.

"You know," Hiccup began, "She must be feeling really lonely without you, or Astrid. Don't you think the least we could do now is give her some nice company?"

Without even waiting for Toothless to respond, Hiccup swung his legs to the side and pushed his body forward.

Toothless waited for him to feel ready to stand, and served as support once Hiccup's body leaned over him.

Step by step, both of them made it across the room and to the front door.

Hearing Hiccup try his best to contain the inner groans of pain from the still healing wound, Toothless looked up at him, and called, "Gruuouuh?"

"I-I-I'm alright, bud. I'm alright." Hiccup assures between harsh breaths.

They continued their walk to the door when it suddenly opened. The

dragon's eyes widened, then his eyelids dropped halfway on them once he saw \_who\_ stood at the door.

"And just \_where\_ do you think \_you're\_ going young man?" Tuffnut asked. Crossing his arms over his chest, then cupping his chin with one hand while looking at Hiccup from head to toe with a studious glare. "I totally \_don't\_ recall hearing word that you could be out of bed just yet. Unless Gothi suddenly changed her mind about it, but since she never really changes her mind, I smell some sneaky business around here."

"Uh, um, to...see Stormfly?" Hiccup responded. Rapidly showing his friend an innocent smile. Hoping he didn't have to work so hard on convincing Tuffnut to let him go without telling anyone about it. Yet again, it's \_Tuffnut\_ we are talking about...

Tuffnut stared blankly at the dragon and rider. Toothless also timidly showed his gums to the blonde male twin.

"Oh, so you are taking your Night Fury for a date with the lady dragon, huh?" Waggles eyebrows teasingly down at Toothless, "Well, hate to break it to you, but she is indisposed. So schedule another day, mister Night Fury."

"I don't think \_a date\_ would be the best term to use, butâ€¦Is she really \_that bad\_?" Hiccup asks. Now feeling a lot more concerned than he did a few hours ago when the news on what happened to Stormfly got to him.

Tuffnut then shrugged, dropped his arms and moved away from the entrance, "Meh, not really. She just looks really depressed. We had to take her back to hers and Toothless' hut because she wouldn't respond to anyone that tried to feed her. Phlegma thought that if we take her home, then she might cheer up a bit. But, it doesn't seem to work."

Hiccup's eyes widened, "I-I never thought Astrid's absence would hit her \_that\_ hard." pauses, "Tuff, you \_have\_ to help me go up to the cabin. It's unfair to leave her alone while feeling so down!"

"So, you sayin' you'd be willing to get attacked by a gloomy dragon?" Tuffnut asked. "She get's angry pretty easily now that she isn't in the mood." snickers, "Heh, you should have seen Snotlout's butt catch fire this morning when he tried to groom her." Tuffnut then walked past Hiccup and ran upstairs.

"Uh, Tuff? Where are you going?" Hiccup asks, watching how the male twin ignored him and went into the bedroom. Sighing aloud, Hiccup looked back down at Toothless, "With or without his help, we have to get to the cabin, bud."

Before Toothless would even answer his rider's mutters, Tuffnut came down the stairs holding a dark brown blanket in his arms. "Yeah, but if you want to go up there, at least cover up a bit." Throws the blanket at Hiccup.

Catching the blanket in both hands, Hiccup then realized he was still shirtless. His worries on Stormily's state and Astrid's absence made even the cold breeze that came from outdoors seem like something completely insignificant.

Tuffnut's half smile assured Hiccup that his friend wouldn't be the one to stop him from doing what his heart commanded him to do. His hands gripped on the blanket's hem and then threw it over his shoulders.

"Wait here." Tuffnut said as he speed walked out of the Haddock home.

Both Hiccup and Toothless shared a perplexed look. Few minutes later, Tuffnut came back with a cart which he made Hiccup get on. Tuffnut hopped on it as well after tying ropes on Toothless' saddle. Toothless then pulled them all the way up to the cabin.

To Hiccup's surprise, the quick adventure didn't cost him any chest pain. On all contrary, the wind felt so rough and daring against his skin, that it only took away the space to worry about his wound and replaced it with loud laughter.

It basically took them about five to eight minutes to get to the cabin—where Tuffnut helped Hiccup in and went back downtown to pretend he didn't know where Hiccup was.

Seeing Stormfly alone in a lone corner of hers and Toothless' hut caused his heart to ache. She was laying on her stomach, one wing with splints. Big pieces of wood secured with a strong rope kept her from being able to move her wing properly. There was a basket full of cooked chicken near her, but the chicken looked like it had been there for long hours. Untouched.

The blanket around Hiccup's body fell to the floor. He hid behind the hut's slightly closed door and while letting Toothless go in first, Hiccup said, "Stormfly? It's me, Hiccup. May I come in?"

Stormfly's head popped up, then she released a careless growl and turned her back to the door.

Toothless went up to her and rubbed his nose against her back.

"I'm going in anyway." At the faint sound of Hiccup's steps inside the hut, Stormfly's head perked up, her tail flipped sideways and yellow spines flew over his head.

Seeing how high the spines went, Hiccup knew that she didn't really mean to shoot him. It was just her ways of telling him that she wanted to be alone.

Not really in the mood to let that kind of request sink in, Hiccup walked further in. "Geesh, you and Astrid were made for each other." His hand still resting over the bands wrapped around his torso. "I-I know how you feel, girl. But I also came here to ask you for a favor."

Hearing him, Stormfly's head moved to his direction.

Toothless watched how Hiccup tried to carefully sit next to Stormfly, then he moved to lay on Hiccup's other side.

Feeling how both dragon's body heat kept him warm, his other hand moved up to Stormfly's sides. Rubbing her scales as he continued



speaking, "I'm going to search for Astrid. This means, that I will need you to do your best in letting your wing heal so that you could come after us."

Hiccup looked down for a second. Still wondering if that dream was real, or if it was just a trick from his desires to find her. "Will you do that for me?" He shakes his head, "No. Not me. Will you do that for Astrid?" corrects.

Stormfly hesitated for a bit, then her head moved up and down. "Graaaawn!"

Hiccup snickered, "Now that's the Stormfly I know!" Rubs her more, "You'll see, you'll get better before you know it."

\* \* \*

><p>"Sir, please allow me to give them more food."<p>

A soft female's voice disrupted Dagur's meal as he dug his teeth into a massive chicken drumstick. Mouthfulâ€"without even bothering to look back at her as she stood behind his seatâ€"he responded, "I said to feed them with what's necessary to keep them alive."

"That is the problem, master Dagur." The woman hurried, "A bowl of water and a piece of bread small enough to hide inside a teenager's palm is not enough to keep them alive."

"Did they die already?" Dagur asked.

She gags, "N-no, sir. Butâ€"

"Then stop whining and do as I say!" Dagur slammed his fists on the table. Chicken flying out of his mouth as he yelled. "The weaker they get, the better the chances of brother Hiccup finding her stepping into the river of death. So don't spoil the plan and remember your place here!"

The female didn't find ways to respond. With the uncontrolled beating of her heart, she bowed her head at him even though his back was to her, turned on her heel, "Yes, master Dagur." and silently left the room.

Her feet took her down a stretched hall lit by torches. At the end of the hall, she turned left and entered a room. She closed the arched wooden door and pressed both palms against it. Her head hung and her shoulders shook.

Sitting on a rock at the end of the room, there was a man of longâ€"straightâ€"white hair. Reading even in the darkness that embraced them since the only lighting came from a torch hanging from the wall. His sweet-honey eyes glowing. Allowing him to be able to see in the dark.

The sound of a door opening and then closing stole his attention from the world he allowed to be sucked into and the glow of his eyes drifted to find his sister linger in the doorway.

Her body slid down, and her knees met the floor.

"Sister!" His hand closed the book and left it well forgotten on the now lone rock as he hurried to her. Crouching behind her, grasping on her shoulders, he says, "Sister, what is the matter?"

She turned to face him. Her glowing-in-the-dark silver eyes desperately searching for unknown things in his face. Trembling fingers going up his arms and halting on his clavicles. "Radames," She breathes, "brother, I can hear it screaming and weeping."

"What are you talking about? \_Who\_ is weeping, sister?" Radames asked. Frightened as he saw the \_scarlet\_ \_tears\_ roll down her pale cheekbones. "Sister, speak!"

"\_My gift\_," She says. "I can hear her soul struggling to stay in this realm. And the child will leave too if we do not do something fast."

"Your gift?" He asks, "Sister, we are far away from home. It is impossible for you toâ€"

"No," She cuts him off short between low pants, "Remember, what was granted to me is to feel, hear, and see unborn creatures that are made \_with love\_. My duty with such powerful gift is to aid those unborn creatures that suffer and are on the verge of death." She gasps a breath, shaking him slightly, "Radames, this child is trying to grow in a body that has been forced to turn against its owner. I can feel it, this child was made with the purest love a couple could ever share. This child, deserves to live! If we do not do something about it, the child's inevitable growth will kill \_her\_!"

"Daria," he whispers her name, "We do not have enough power to save them. When the berserkers trapped us, this foreign land had already drained most of our powers."

"Brother, please!" She cries, "You, \_of all people\_ know very well of the price there is to pay if one runs away from doing the right thing." She forces a smile to him, but it is quickly replaced by more cries, "Brother, please. We \_must\_ do something."

"\_How\_?"

"Use the little power we have left, combine it to create a portal and take them with you."

"And \_you\_?" He asks. Cupping her face in his hands, "Daria, you are the only family I have left. Why sacrifice yourself for a stranger that does not even share the same origin as you do?"

One hand of hers moves up to rest on his cheek, "Fear of losing once again, blinds you." Whispers, "Our role as sons and daughters of the Foreverwing, is to always do the right thing." Her thumb catches a sole, clear tear that rolled down his cheek, making her lips form a weak smile as her heart raced even faster, "I, will stay forever hereâ€|" rests her other hand on his chest, where his heart is to be, "â€|with you."

"Da-Daria?" Radames called.

Scarlet tears rained down her skin, her breathings became harsher and her eyes began to glow even brighter. Diminutive stars emerged from

the silver of her eyes and floated to his lips. Silver threads emerged from her arms and spiraled straight to his diamond-shaped earring. As the earring sucked the threads in, the black shade on it's ends rose and soon half of his earring was pitch black.

With that, Radames picked her up in his arms and laid her on a corner. He did understand very well that it was all part of her duty in life. To feel what an unborn child made by love felt inside its mother's womb. Daria's tears of blood represented the pain in the body of the unborn child's mother. The more the unborn child and mother silently suffered, the darker her tears turned.

Daria, was a woman of silver-colored eyes, rose-red thin lips, delicate fingers and a noble heart beating within her chest. The color of her hair was silky-gray, and it reached down her lower back.

Silently leaving her to peacefully rest, Radames left the room.

\* \* \*

><p>"I wonder if it's day, or night." Ruffnut says while laying down on the floor, staring at the ceiling. "How many days since we got here, or if someone is already searching for us. Still can't believe <em>you</em> got knocked up," grins, "I wonder how much Tuff is suffering for my absenceâ€|heh, now that'd be something new. He's probably happier than ever now that he doesn't have to share the air he breathes." She frowns, "I also wonder, why did your mom betrayed you like that? Not that something wasn't smelling right, but, I just don't get it. Has she always hated you that much? To team up with Dagur, it actually leaves a lot to say..."

"Gods, I am sooo hungry I could eat a herd of boars all by myself!" Ruffnut clicks her tongue when she heard no answer from Astrid. At all. Her head turned to the side to see her. Pouts, "Are you even listening to me!?"

Astrid didn't respond.

Ruffnut's elbows pushed her up so she could get a better look at her friend. "Uh, hey Astrid?" Calls while she moved into a sitting position, "Did you fall asleep again?"

No answer.

"Astrid?" Calls again. Ruffnut glared. Trying to see what was going on with her, but the darkness wouldn't let her see much. She knew that Astrid had her face to the other side. Probably her nose touched her arm. One knee was slightly up.

Allowing silence take over for a bit, the time came when soft moans of fatigue pierced through Ruffnut's ears. Realizing where they came from, Ruffnut raised her voice as she continued calling for her friend, "Hey, preggo lady! Snap out of it will ya!? You're creeping me out."

Just then, the door opens and Radames comes in. Holding a bowl of water in both hands. "Ladâ€"

The girl's moans cut his words off short. Instinctively, Radames

threw the bowl away and scurried to the girl in apparent discomfort. Kneeling by her side, placing a palm on her forehead. "Dear Frigga" He whispers to himself.

"\_What\_" Ruffnut asks.

"She is sweating cold." Radames responded.

"Is that bad?" Ruffnut tilts her head to the side.

"Very." Radames closed his eyes and moved his hand from Astrid's forehead to the lowest of her abdomen. Quickly pulling his hand away. Eyes widen, "Daria was right." He mumbles to himself"again.

"W\_ho\_ is Daria? Would you mind filling me in!? I'm her friend, you know?" Ruffnut says.

But Radames wouldn't listen to her. His full attention was on Astrid. Her lips were blue and the usual fainted pink color on her cheeks that served as proof of blood flowing normally, was almost gone. Her eyes were closed and it was clear to him that she didn't feel him when he touched her"for she didn't react to his touch.

Radames' eyes closed, he took in a deep breath and let go of it while standing back up. "\_Foreverwing\_. \_I beg of you. If you can hear me from where I stand, please concede me all I need to fulfill your desires\_." Having whispered the prayer, Radames stretched both of his hands over the chains that tied Astrid's feet to the stoned floors.

Fingertips emitted a faded purple thread that wrapped around Astrid's ankles and in no less than a second later, the chains broke and her feet were set free. Radames moved his hands to her wrists. The purple thread wrapped around her wrists and with a quick \_CLANK\_, her hands were also set free.

Ruffnut was speechless. It was hard to believe what her eyes were seeing. But what concerned her more, was the fact that Astrid wasn't even responding to the feeling of her limbs being finally free.

Radames placed his hand on her forehead and crimson drops emerged from his fingertips, and trespassed the barriers of her skin. As a result, Astrid's moans slowly got silenced and the sweat on her skin dried out.

"What are you doing to her?" Ruffnut whispered.

"Sending her to sleep. This way, it will be much easier to aid her and the child." He responds while pulling away from her, standing up at turning to free Ruffnut.

With Astrid in his arms and Ruffnut standing by his side, Radames glared at the wall in front of them. From his eyes, four very small stars emerged and floated towards the wall. The black shade in his earring began to drain. Quickly reaching the earring's tip, until all that could be seen from the black shade, was now just a dark spot. Radames' eyes began to blink several times as he struggled to keep his thoughts focused."\_I am losing energy\_"he thought. Knowing that if he used the last bit of magic left in a world where he didn't

belong to, then it would send him straight to the River of the Lost Souls.

The four stars joined and a triangular portal appeared. Revealing a bedchamber on the other side.

"Wow." Ruffnut says, "Yup. I've definitely gone crazy now."

Radames gasped as he noticed the portal begin to shrink. "There isn't enough magic to keep the portal open for too long. We must go in as if we were one whole body. Otherwise, we will never make it to the other side."

"And what if we don't make it to the other side?" Ruffnut asks.

"If we do not make it to the other side, our souls may get suspended in the rift between worlds." Radames responded.

Ruffnut rose a brow at him, "In the what between what?"

"The space between dimensions." Shakes head, "I could explain more to you if you so desire, but now, please do as I say unless you wish to be trapped in a dimension and never be able to go back home."

As if by impulse, Ruffnut clung to his sleeve. "Uuuuh, in that case, I suggest you not to fill me into anymore details. Unless you'd wanna end up having to carry two viking ladies instead of one." grins afterwards, "â€|which isn't so much of a bad ideaâ€|" eyes him from head to toe.

Radames released a regretful sigh, "Forgive me, sister. Our power is not enough, for I am forced to leave you behind."

With a heavy feeling in his chest, Radames stepped forward and all three of them got sucked into the portal.

\* \* \*

><p>Within the darkest forest of a far away land, rested a massive creature whose body was <em>much bigger<em> than a Bewilderbeast. Its body resembled that of a tree, and from his back emerged countless pine trees.

Strong chin, from which descended extremities that resembled thick tree roots.

Even thicker and longer roots brushed backwards formed a crown on the creature's head. Soil-brown-colored eyes filled with grace and good as they gazed at the distant night-sky above.

"\_Woouuuuuu\_," It calls, "\_Woouuuuuu\_," once more. A star in the darkest side of the sky moved down and to the left and then vanished out of nowhere.

The star appeared on the now empty cell where Ruffnut and Astrid were kept captive just a few minutes ago. Passing then through the walls and finding Daria's body on the floor.

Daria's body began to glow. Hundreds of smaller stars emerged from

her body as it then faded away. Disappearing from the foreign world curiosity had led her to.

### 23. SnowBell

**\*\*Ruffnut\*\***

We actually\_ made it\_ to the other side. And in one piece! This place was so different from the one I am used to.

When we passed through the portal, we stepped on a humongous room with gray-stoned walls and a huge golden chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Each and every one of the candles in the chandelier were cupped in red-stained glass shaped like tulipsâ€"which only gave the room a stunningly bixbite lighting. The windows were arched and to my far left, there was what looked like double-glass doors that led to a terrace.

Well, a terrace which I haven't seen yet since the golden curtains were drawn. Oh, did I mention that there was a bed big enough for up to seven fools to sleep in? The bed's comforter was pearl-white and the pillows were honey-gold. On either side of the bed, there was a night table, each with a glass vase of red carnations.

Radames never hesitated to lay Astrid's knocked out body on the bed.

Weird women in long dresses pushed their way into the room and in a blink of an eye, one of them had taken a hold of Astrid's arm and tried to insert what looked like \_a needle\_ meant to go into her peripheralâ€"forearmâ€"vein. Without thinking it twice, I grabbed the woman's wrist and twisted it backwards, "Hey! Back offâ€"aah!"

The woman pulled her hand away and from a quick wave of her hand, a strong force pushed me all the way across the room until my back banged against the wall and my butt met the floor. Books from a bookshelf above my head fell on me. Groaning, I pushed the books off of me and stood back up. The woman hissed at me as she speed walked toward me when the room's doors opened and another lady came in. Stepping between us and spreading her arms to stop us from beating the shit out of each other.

"Stop!" the lady says, directing her words to the crazy bitch that attacked me. "These are \_my\_ guests. Might as well treat them accordingly."

Hearing her, the freaky bitch hesitated for a moment, then recovered her posture and nodded at the other lady. "Yes, madam."

The lady stretched her hand out to the freaky bitch, who then gave her a bag filled with some kind of colorful liquid. "My name, is \_Daria\_. I am one of the Masters of this house." Shows me the bag, "This, is a solution that neutralizes the effects of the toxins inside your friend's body. Helps the body excrete them through the pores. It has worked for centuries on \_all kinds\_ of creatures."

"Gothi can do that." I said. "She knows everything."

"Probably." Daria says, "But one thing has already been clear to me since the moment I first met Dagurâ€"and it's that your people is unfamiliar with the secrets and rules behind sorcery." Points at Astrid, "What was given to your friend, was an antique method to control nature's doing. For your people, you probably call it science. But to my people, it is all the same thing. Means to try and get in the way of balance."

Hesitating, I pointed my right forefinger at the bag in her hands, "Then tell me, where does that thing come from?" I could have sounded far too obvious this time, but after all I've seen in the past few days, I couldn't help feeling too overprotective. It was inevitable.

Probably noticing how much the effects of her words had started to work on me, Daria relaxes her shoulders, "On a meadow located near the eastern mountains of Hoffnaan, a strange lily grows every three solar eclipses. This solution, is simply an extract from it."

"How'd you know that you would need it now?" I asked.

"We always wait until after the third eclipse for the lily to show itself to us. We carefully take a good amount of it's juices and store them for emergencies. The perimeter is guarded to keep creatures with other intentions to take advantage of it." Daria said.

"Ohâ€|" I mumble. "Cool."

"Now that you know what this solution is meant to do, may I proceed in connecting an intravenous line to your friend? Time is running rather quickly for her at this moment." Daria said.

Without even letting her words settle in my head, I stepped aside and watched how Daria hurried to Astrid's side. I turned away to see Radames standing like a statue at a corner of the room. Watching how Daria hung the bag of the lily's extracts from a tall, red-wood coat hanger that a maid had set next to the bed.

I walked to him and waved my hand, "Hellooo, anyone in there?" I teased.

Like frozen in space and time, the constant snapping of my fingers near his face made Radames shake himself back to his senses and then hurry to where Daria stood. He took both of her hands in his, "Sister!"

"Sister?!" I rose a brow.

"H-how did you make it?" Radames asks.

"The Foreverwing gave me a second chance." Daria responds, "And do you know why?" she grins, "He wishes to meet her."

"Wait, Astrid, you say?" I ask, "Who is this Foreverwing you speak of? Can someone please fill me in!?"

Daria chuckles, "I will explain to you soon. Promise."

"Hold up, change of priorities then..." I walk to them, pointing down

at Astrid. "My friend here hasn't moved since we got here. Can you at least tell me if the baby is okay?"

Daria looked down at Astrid, then back at me. Down at Astrid, and then bit her lower lip. Clicking her tongue, she hid her right hand in her left arm and when she pulled it out, she was holding a red rose's bud in her hand. Showing it to me, "Listen carefully, now. If it blooms, then the child lives. If it withers, then the child is gone."

As if I had just swallowed down a rock, I watched how Daria moved to hold the flower a few inches over Astrid's abdomen. Seconds passed and nothing happened. Making me wonder if these people were just freaks with a nice use of words. When I was about to say something about how weird all this felt to me, the flower's bud began to quickly bloom into a beautifulâ€"fully openâ€"red rose. Daria held the flower still for exactly three more seconds before pulling her hand back and then showing it to me with a bright smile tattooed on her lips. "Nothing to worry about."

"I'm gladâ€" I heard myself say. Then, the silence in the room was interrupted by the maid's movements that soon made me feel like I was in their way.

Next thing I saw, Astrid's hair was almost completely loose and one of the ladies took her skirt off, folded it and then left it on the bed's end.

"Hey, why are you doing that?!" I hurried to the lady and grabbed her arm. "You can't just take advantage of a knocked out person and undress them."

Pfft, of course, these shameless whores wouldn't know anything about decency. They wore long dresses that covered their feet and brushed against the floors as they walked. All of them had really long hair that reached to their lower backs and they wandered around with it all loose. Carelesslyâ€"A few braids tied together on the back of their head, that is.

Oh, rightâ€"their \_boobs\_ showed too! Well, not entirely, but their dress was so tight on the torso, that their tits looked like they were about to pop out. Ugh, seriously disturbing, manâ€"|

The woman brushed my hold away and continued wandering around the room, going in and out nonstop. Bringing towels and blankets into the room and setting them on a round table at the end of it.

As I turned back to the bed, my eyes widened as soon as I saw how delicately Radames covered Astrid's body under the comforts after Daria removed her breast-bands and dressed her into a thin-strapped pearl-white satin nightgown.

As if he didn't want to hurt her in her sleep, Radames treated her with such calm and care that it only made me wonder whether he was a friend or a foe.

Another maid took Daria's place and waved her hands over Astrid and all of the dirt on her skin and hair seemed to be sucked up by her palms until Astrid's body was completely clean. "Wow, I wish I knew how to get clean without having to take a bath." I heard myself



say.

Radames made sure Astrid's body was comfortable. The covers were brought over her shoulders and then his hand brushed her bangs off her eyes. When he stood from the bed's edge, his hands held a dagger.

Walking toward me, he shows me the dagger and says, "The maid said she had this between her breast bands. Judging by the place she kept it, I believe it is a weapon that means something special to her."

I shrug, "Never seen it before."

"How so?" He asks, "Are you not her friend?"

"Being her friend doesn't mean I'll know what she keeps in her underwear." frowns, "That's just gross."

Radames surprised me with a slight chuckle as he turned his back to me and placed the dagger on the night table by Astrid's side. "Then, let us respect her private thoughts about her own possessions."

I snicker, "You talk funny."

"How so?" He tilts his head to the side,

"Isn't it obvious?" I ask, "Every word you spit out sounds like it was meant to be perfect. Are you some kind of god or what?" A lady came running to me and grabbed both of my hands. She turned them and gripped on them. Her eyes traveling up my arms and down to my wrists where there were light-red-marks. She turned my hands and saw the dried blood on the knuckles of my right hand. I quickly snatched my hands away and brought them close to my chest, "Quit it already!"

The lady frowned down at me and then hurried away. I stuck my tongue out at her while she was still on her back and then glanced back at Radames—who was trying to hold back the desires to burst out laughing at my unladylike attitude. "What!?" I snapped.

"You know, they are only trying to aid you." He says.

I shrug, "Well, I don't need any aid. I'm fine. These injuries are already dried anyway and besides, I'm used to getting hurt often. It's part of the life of a Viking. I have fallen from a dragon's back countless times and am still on one piece so thank you for insisting, but no thank you because I don't need weird and random women touching me all over."

"Sounds like you are very irritated for some reason." He says.

"Oh, yeah? Well, guess what, I am irritated. Instead of bringing us here, why didn't you just poof us back to Berk?"

He rose a brow, "Poof you?" He snickers slightly, "What does that even mean?"

Is this guy seriously amused by me!? That's a first—

Radames shakes his head. His lips relaxed into a sweet grin that only made my heart feel really strangeâ€”the good kind of strange.

"I am no god." He clears out, then looks at the women that were still pacing around the room like little-crazy ants, "Thank you," he raises his voice so everyone may hear him, "â€”for your assistance. Daria and I will take it from here."

Without another word, the hags left the room and now there was just the four of us left.

I walked to the bed and sat next to Astrid. Facing her. It honestly freaked me out to see her in this position. I've never even imagined she'd be on such a shape. I always saw Astrid as the kind of girl that wouldn't ever get hurt.

Guess I was wrongâ€”|

After seeing all that, it really hit me the fact that even though I have an awesomely strong and fearless friend, there are still times I have to remind myself that she is still a human with feelings. Someone with bones and blood running through her veins. That she is a badass in keeping stuff to herself and always manages to keep things under control? Hel yeah! But stillâ€”|people overestimate her as much as they have underestimated Hiccup.

Though personally, I'd love to throw Big Boobied Bertha into a sea of just-sharks, it didn't surprise me the way Astrid took the backstab. She didn't say a word about it. No, actually, I did. And I wanted to say sooooo much more.

I didn't expect Astrid to cry, ask stupid questions, or even threaten the bitch. Why? Don't you know!? Well, first, Astrid doesn't know what crying is, I think. Second, why the hel would she ask something deep down she already knew the answer to? And thirdâ€”and the one that makes me even angrierâ€”is that no matter how far Bertha would go to hurt Astrid, Astrid still was a loyal girl that wouldn't ever try to show disrespect to her own mother. No matter how much of a bitch the bloated goat was.

On the other hand, if you ask me, I don't really give a shit about respect. If you mess with me or my friends, you seriously got a ticket down to my bad side. No matter who the hel you are. Only Tuff and I are allowed to spice up their lives with a prank every now and then!

Bertha could be Frigga's sister, for all I care. And yet I still wouldn't forgive her for what she did. I knew she was up to something weird. Her bipolar attitude just didn't feel right. At all!

Yet, right now? It was Astrid's health the one that concerned me.

The girl wasn't even moving even though she was deeply sleeping. During the few days we spent at the cell, Bertha didn't come back into the cell after we discovered her plan and Dagur only allowed Radames to serve us bread and water twice a day.

If I tell you that Astrid ate all the bread that was given to her, then I'd be lying. There were times when I saw her body twisting. I

knew that she was in pain, because of the way her arm-chains were being pulled down and her legs pressed together. If it weren't for that, I wouldn't have guessed how she felt. Simply because she never cried out. She actually managed to swallow the pain.

I know, scary.

Speaking of scary, as I gazed down at her, I noticed how her lips were dark purple and had what looked like black stains. She's been biting on her lips until literally sinking her teeth in. Since her body was covered with the comforter, I couldn't see her wristsâ€"but I don't think I even need to see them to know that they are probably fucked up as well.

For the love of Thor, Astridâ€"please wake up soon. \_

"Fear not." As if being able to read my thoughts, Radames' voice interrupted my inner babble, his hand resting on my shoulder, "Here, she will be safe. And so will you."

"Hate to break it to you, handsome. But to us, you are still a stranger." I said.

"And you are strangers to me." He says. "We are even."

"Uh, no. We're not even. Not at all." I turn to him, feeling irritated, "All we want, is to go back home and kick that bitch's ass straight to Helheim's feet for treason and dishonor. Not to mention, when Hiccup finds out about all this, he'sâ€"wellâ€"he'sâ€" I trailed off.

Suddenly I realized, that I didn't exactly know how Hiccup would react once he finds out about the kind of hell we've been through. Of course, he'd be mad. For sure. But then, makes me wonder what would hurt him more; to know that Dagur was behind this set up all along and that this is all just a trap to finish his revenge, to know that Bertha was teaming up with his arch enemy, or to find out that Astrid is all preggy and fighting for her life and the little maggot's.

I know I'd be really angry. But knowing Hiccup, how would he feel? Not that I careâ€"but, ugh! I just seriously wanna get the hell out of here as soon as possible!

"Hey umâ€" Suddenly, I felt my mood going from really steamed up, to almost numb enough to send me to sleep as well. "Do you think her natural skin color will be back?" Pause, "I mean, the rosiness on her cheeks and the peach of her lips. Do you think her eyes will open and this time, she'll be herself again?"

"Well, I cannot promise you that she will be herself, as you say, after such a horrible experience. But," Radames moved to the bag connected to her body. He touched it and then continued talking, "this solution is to trap in all the impurities stored in her bloodstream and destroy them. Once her body reacts to the solution and excretes the toxins through her pores, her brain will send her body signals to relax and her eyes will be able to open."

"Sounds like you have it all figured out." I mocked. Not really convinced about a thing he just said.

"This is a method that has been used for centuries, in my land. It has saved billions of lives." He pauses, looking back down at her, as if unsure of what to say next, "Although, I have honestly never seen someone be able to bear this kind of torture for so long. Seems like your friend here is much stronger than we all thinkâ€|and so is the child." Radames then glanced back at me, his eyes showed off a great amount of astonishment, "Otherwise, judging by the time she has had those poisonous effects in her body that started to do their job on her right after conceiving, depriving the baby from it's rights to grow naturally in her womb, she would have had a miscarriage already."

My eyes fell back on Astrid, not surprised by the sound of his words, but worried that we wouldn't heal her in time. "Do you think she'll be able to actually \_have\_ the baby like any other normal person would?"

"Definitely." Radames didn't even wait to answer. "The baby is there, fighting alongside its mother. We must trust time."

"No doubt, then." I slightly snickered, knowing exactly the reason as to believing his words about the baby's possible strength, "That thing inside her is a Viking warrior. Heir of a magnificent shield maiden and a nerdy chief." I glance back at him, not helping the mocking smirk, "There couldn't possibly be a better combination."

Radames's shoulders seemed to relax as he stepped closer to me. "Then, in that case, all that there is left for us, is to wait for Frigga to do her job."

"And, how long will it take for her to wake up?" I ask.

Radames looks down at Astrid, as if thinking about his answer beforehand. "I am not sure."

I frown, "Wait, you say that you know this method for centuries, then you tell me that you don't know how long it will take for her to wake up!? What kind of bullshit is that!?"

"You must understand the mysteries hidden inside a human's body, first." Daria said. Sweet, calm and serene.

\* \* \*

><p>Beneath the shelter of the trees, a silhouette dashed down rough soil and climbed up the thickest and oldest boles. The curving ends of a staff made out of dragon horns hooked with branches and threw the masked woman's body in the air with a simple swing.<p>

Pushed down by gravity, her other hand took hold of a strong vine, allowing her fall be less rough as her eyes watched how the dark ground below rapidly became bigger and closer.

Letting go of the vine, her feet immediately bolted further into the jungle. Skipping fallen logs, crouching from unexpectedly low branchesâ€|avoiding wild animals.

She slid down a landslide that took her to the edges of a dark pond. Her knees bent, upper body slowly brought forward, down and closer to

the plants closest to the water.

She dug a hand in the pocket on her right thigh's side and pulled out a violently ripped faded paper page. In the page, there were several small drawings of plants. Her eyes searched the page from top to bottom, side to side. Spotting the drawing at the farâ€œrightâ€œend of it, of little circles with dark single dots on each of them. When she lowered the page, and glanced at the plants in front of her, she saw white little circles with black single dots on each of them. Just as how the drawing showed.

Carefully, she picked a few balls and brought them up to her masked face. Wanting to take a closer look at them. She then buried the page back in her pocket, took hold of the empty bag hanging from her belt and threw the little white balls in.

\_Bruaann! Brooaa!\_

The call of a Stormcutter coming from the west was her cue to leave. She secured the white balls in the bag and scurried toward the continuing sounds.

As soon as she arrived where the Stormcutter patiently waited for her, a loud gasp echoed in her mask as she realized where she was standing.

Hesitating, she pulled the paper page out once again and looked over the drawings. As her hand slowly moved down, and her eyes landed on the plants surrounding her, her hand closed into a tight fist. Crumpling the paper page in.

Around her, was the vivid image of \_almost\_ every green plant in her drawing. Some had wider leaves than others, and even though they shared the same nutrients and small amount of light, their roles on a human's body was \_completely different\_.

Picking two leaves of each plant and throwing them in the bag, the masked woman said, "Good work, Cloudjumper. There is only \_one\_ left."

Cloudjumper tilted his head to the side. Once she was done, she turned to face him, "The one we are now looking for, does not appear in the drawings I made. But it is essential to prove my hypothesis."

The dragon offered his wing to her. She hooked her staff on his wing-nail and he carefully brought her up to his back. "Let's get out of here. I am sure we won't find that plant in such a dark place."

Just as how Valka predicted, It didn't take them long after flying out of the dark forest to find a meadow full of what they were searching for. Snow white flower petals that hung from the peduncle and took the shape of bells gave up the image of a stunning white carpet when gazing at it from the skies.

The wind pushed them side to side. Having them look like they were dancing with it. Their smell, was sweetâ€œlike melted sugarâ€œand it rubbed Valka's nose as soon as her feet touched the ground.

Crouching, she picked a few flowersâ€”keeping the leavesâ€”and placed them inside another bag that hung from her waist-belt. This bag, had other herbs in. But their scent as she opened the bag, was rather sweet compared to the other one.

"Time to go home." She said as soon as her dragon's wing elevated her to his back once again.

About two hours later, the woman was walking downtown. Her mask, held under her arm as she entered the armory and was greeted by a man with an interchangeable hand.

"Oh, hello there Valka." The man said, pushing a basket of rocks to the side. "Haven't seen you in a while. What have ya been up to, eh?"

"Some research." Valka responds. Pulling out the paper page from her pocket and offering it to him. "Say, Gobber? Have you ever heard of the combination of these strange plants?"

Takes the page from her hand and eyes it. "Ei, I don't think mixing all these together would be a very wise idea." Gives the page back to her.

"What about, mixing their extract and consuming it? Let's just say, twice a day?" She asks.

Gobber turns his back to her and walks to the forge. Starting to hammer straight a sword. "Well, if you want ta hurt someone in a slow and clean way, thenâ€”" pauses, "Drinking their extract all together, will debilitate a certain system in a person's body. The plant with little circles and dark dots in your drawing aids the reproductive system. Mixing it to all the other plants causes its function to be reversed. Therefore instead of improving the reproductive system, it will stop it from functioning the way it should." shrugs a shoulder carelessly, "No big deal for a lad. But for a lady, it will be dangerous to bare babies since as the little brat grows, her reproductive organs won't be able to support it."

"Soâ€”you say that the baby can break her insides apart?" She asks. Raising a brow as she tried to understand the process.

Gobber nods, "Yep." Hammers a bit faster. "Hehe, some people are coward enough ta do something like that and not risk leaving traces behind."

"What do you mean, Gobber?" She asks.

"'Tis the beauty of wanting to kill someone meaningless to yah while leaving the dirty job ta nature." He responds. Half a second later, the hammering comes to a stop and heâ€”finallyâ€”looks back at her. Curling his brows in curiosity as he slowly stepped closer to her, "Say, Valka? Why are you asking me this?"

Valka gags, but it was fast enough for him not to know how to identify it as an actual gag, or a simple gasp of surprise. She steps backwards as he steps forward, "N-nothing in particular. I just saw the drawings in one of Hiccup's books and got curious about it." She lied.

Of course, Valka wasn't willing to spill out her thoughts just yet. She had to make sure of the facts' existence first. Until that moment came, she just had to manage to keep it to herself.

Seeing how Gobber wouldn't stop searching for practically unwanted answers, Valka pushes the page back in her pocket and skips backwards. Out of the armory, "A-anyway. I have to check up on Hiccup. Thank you for the information, Gobber. See you later!" Next second, she was already running backwards while speaking and waving until her back bumped against what felt like a large rock. "Oh!"

As she turned around, she realized that it wasn't a large rock. It was a big woman's tough chest that could have almost pushed her to the ground.

Valka blinked in surprise for a moment, then matched the woman's frown at her, "\_Bertha\_!?"

"I wonder why you are \_always\_ in my way." Bertha Hofferson said. As she gazed down in annoyance at the slim Viking before her. Both of her arms dropped on her broad sides.

"Where have you been?" Valka didn't wait to ask.

"Do I now have to report my every move to a half beast, half human dodo like you?" Bertha growls lowly.

Not really in the mood to deal with her insults, Valka disengaged her staff from her back, gave it a quick spin and pressed one of the curved ends against Bertha's neck. Slightly moving Bertha's chin up. "It's been \_a week\_ after our last battle and every lost survivor has been found and checked out of the searching list. \_Your\_ \_name\_, was on that list. \_Where\_ were you?"

"Maybe you didn't search correctly." Bertha simply responds. "After all, it's \_you\_ we are talking about." Slightly snickers, then slaps Valka's staff easily aside. "Anyway, I am searching for my daughter. Have you seen her?"

"Questioning about her won't relieve you from any suspicion." Valka says.

Bertha snorts, "Suspicious!? \_Me\_? Ha! Valka, please, don't make me laugh so hard or you'll cause me ulcers."

"Not a joke." Valka said.

Bertha's brows curled into a mad frown, "And, do you have any \_solid proof\_ that I might be doing some sort of criminal act? Against \_who\_?"

Valka didn't answer. Her serious glare moved away from the woman in front of her, as if to keep her from spitting her thoughts at her for once and all. But the woman was right. She had no solid proof to accuse her of anything. She needed more than just some old information and a bunch of plants.

Seeing her back off from the argument, Bertha mocked, "Heh, see? You have nothing useful to say. As usual." begins to turn on her heel,

"Maybe if you just stopped goofing around and blindly accusing people, then your son wouldn't be in such a bad shape and Astrid would have been found already."

Valka's shoulders stiffened. She gave one step forward, and frowned at Bertha's back in wonder, "I never mentioned that Hiccup was badly injured and Astrid was missing!"

Bertha's feet seemed to have frozen as Valka's words dug into her ears. Valka took that moment to walk around Bertha and stand in front of her. A curious look in her eyes and a faint smile across her lips, "No one knows that Hiccup was grievously hurt. Only those closest to him. Also, Gobber made sure everyone in the Village believes that Astrid left with Eret to get more medical assistance from the neighboring tribes in order to prevent people to get concerned. How did you know that the truth, is that she is actually missing?"

About a whole minute passed, and Bertha still wouldn't reply. When she managed to do so, she said, "Didn't you just tell me she was missing?"

Valka slowly shakes her head in denial, "No. I never gave you an answer on where she was."

"Well, maybe you should consider not to lie to your allies as a method to keep them unalarmed." Bertha says.

"Do not talk with such a sardonic tone, Bertha Hofferson. It is shamefully not suitable for a lady."

Bertha huffed within and with that, she pushed Valka aside and continued walking, "Think whatever you desire."

Valka watched as the woman's figure became farther and farther.

You definitely have something to do with Astrid's disappearance. "Valka thought "It wouldn't surprise me. After all, only a heartless monster like you would ever dare to try and kill her own daughter. For jealousy and greed, no less!"

About half an hour later, Valka walked into the Haddock home and went straight to the dinning table where the basket where Astrid kept her SnowBell ingredients was "which were already spoiled. After long seconds of just staring down at it, Valka went to one of the cabinets in the kitchen and pulled out an empty medium-sized bag. She then went back to the dinning table and emptied the contents of Astrid's SnowBell basket in. A small jar slides down the bag and falls to the floor, breaking itself in pieces.

Valka gags. Quickly, she kneels and pushes the brown powder together so it'd be easier to pick up when her head tilted to the side and her body leaned closer to the powder. She brought two fingers to her nose and sniffed them twice. "Achllys? In powder? Is this woman mad!?"

Valka had come across the Achlys fruits countless times in her life. She knew that it was a rare fruit that didn't grow in many places. People could do many things with it; mixing their juice with aloe gel could be used to treat burns, or using it as a way to make someone



lose consciousness for a few hours, among other things. The Achlys could be as beneficial, as it could be dangerous. What Valka couldn't quite understand, was the reason as to why it was also included in Astrid's basket, giving out the first impression of being simply \_sugar\_.

Without a second thought to it, Valka stood up, hurried to the cabinets, emptied the jar of salt and then went back to the Achlys' on the floor.

"How have they managed to make this a powder that could be mistaken by sugar?" She asked herself as she pushed as much as ever be possible of the Achlys into the jar. When she was done, she placed the jar on the table and grabbed the bag with the rest of Astrid's SnowBell ingredients.

Ties the bag closedâ€œ"

"Valka?"

Phlegma's voice startled her. As she glanced up the stairs to find her old friend standing at her son's room entrance, she quickly hid the bag behind her back. "Phlegma! What are you doing up there? You startled me."

Phlegma walks down the stairs, holding a piece of paper in her hand. "Checking on Hiccup. At first, I thought he had grown tired of staying in the living room and went back up to his room but not even Toothless is here. Instead, I found this on his bed." offers her the piece of paper.

Valka took the page with one hand while the other still held the bag behind her back.

The note says,

\*\*\_Mom, please forgive me for leaving like this. But I can't wait any longer. Every minute I spend here, waiting and waiting for my body to heal, is another minute wasted. I am going after Astrid. \_\*\*

\*\*\_I know I have certain responsibilities to take care of, as the chief. But as you very well know, Astrid forms a great part of my life, and Berk's. It is a fact that I can't just simply ignore. There is this strong feeling that keeps pressuring me to go after her. \_\*\*

\*\*\_Not sure how long it will take me and Toothless to find her. Until then, I entrust Berk's safety and wellbeing to you and Gobber.\_\*\*

\_\*\*Sincerely, Hiccup.\*\*\_

Valka sighs, "Doesn't surprise me. He sure takes after his father."

"You have been gone for quite a few days. I assume he left soon after you did." Phlegma said.

"Aye," Valka nods, "Sounds like him." Just then, Valka couldn't help letting her lips form a sweet grin that spilled nostalgia all over

the place, "I really hope he finds her soon, and return safely."

Phlegma snorts, then shakes her head as she walks further into the kitchen, "Well when he does find her, I hope they stay far away for quite a while."

Valka turned to her, "What?"

Phlegma shrugs. Opening a cabinet and grabbing the jar of milk with one hand and two empty mugs with the other. Setting them on the counter.

Valka had taken advantage of the moment and stepped backwards until the back of her thighs made contact with the couch's arm. She placed the bag on the couch and then pushed her fingers against the cushion so it would hide the bag. When Phlegma turned around, Valka quickly sat on the couch's arm and forced a smirk out that barely even lasted two seconds.

"Let's face it, Valka. Ever since we were children, strange things have been happening around us. Everything was fine until you were taken away by dragons and then your own son finds you twenty years later and brings you home. Peace embraced us for a few months although I cannot say the same for Hiccup and Astrid's relationship. In my opinion, I wouldn't be surprised if they got distanced for a while due to the busy schedules we all had. Trust me, not the way I would have desired my early adult-days with the man I loved to start. But, I guess they are pretty good at managing thingsâ€"which makes me feel very proud of them. Yet, they got married and didn't even have the chance to enjoy their honeymoon."

"How are you so sure they didn't enjoy it?" Valka asked, "They seemed quite happy after we celebrated their union." chuckles, "Too happy, must I say."

"Yes, but I wouldn't have fully enjoyed my honeymoon while thinking about getting myself ready for a war that could bring tragedy to my people." Phlegma pointed out.

Hearing her, Valka had to slightly nod in acknowledgment.

"Get my point?" Phlegma asks, "What I say, is that now that Hiccup left to search for her, they might as well want to take their time in coming back. You know, enjoy the outdoors together for a little while longer. Might as well give us enough time to try and tie a few loose strings around here."

"Ah, I see now. Yes, they do deserve some time to talk about other important mattersâ€"|" Valka heard herself mumble.

"Other important matters?" Phlegma asks "Like what exactly?"

Valka releases a slight gag, "Uh, um. Nothing. Nothing to worry about."

Valka thought Phlegma would let her slide off this one, but instead, the robust woman leaned back against the counters and crossed her arms over her chest, "Yeh cannot fool me, Valka. I know you since we

were children." Tilts head to the side, "Something bothers you, am I wrong? You know something I ignore."

"Wellâ€¦" Valka mutters,

"Wanna talk about it?" Phlegma asks,

"Honestly?" Valka says, looking up at her friend. Not that she didn't trust Phlegma. She actually did since they had been friends since childhood and she very well knew Phlegma The Fierce was a righteous woman. But, Valka just didn't feel like most of the news were hers to share. She needed to have Astrid before her very own eyes to confirm that she was with child, or not. And she also needed Astrid to confirm matters involving Bertha. Astrid, was the missing piece of her almost-solved puzzle. "Not that I do not wish to talk about it. I actually do. But, it is not the right time, yet."

Understanding her ways, Phlegma nodded. She was grateful that she agreed to tell her sooner or later. But it still bothered her to think that there were other things to be concerned about aside from Astrid's, Ruffnut's and Eret's strange disappearance. Yet she wasn't willing to argue with her friend, since deep down, she very well knew that whenever Valka felt ready, she would tell her everything she needs to know.

## 24. Hoffnaan

"So, let me see if I understand all this craziness." Astrid's hands wrapped around her axe's handle and pulled it out of the tree's trunk. "The Realm of Dreams, allows me to see and speak with you, who is supposed to be enjoying life in Valhalla. It allows me to see and do things that would be rather forbidden in the life of those that still live, all according to how I feel or what my heart desires to see and do. Did I miss anything?"

"Close enough." Vincent said. Walking much further from her.

A cornflower blue sky full of dreams above them. In the meadow where their first reunion was, the privilege of meeting again, was granted to both of them.

Vincent and his daughter, were sharing the kind of moment that had been denied by life, many years ago. They were throwing their axes at pine trees and competed to see who hit the farthest tree.

Astrid, was wearing a long sleeved sky-blue tunic that reached her mid-thighs and black leggings. She was barefooted and a black-leathered belt with a bronze dragon emblem hugged her waist. Her hair was nicely brushed back on a braid and her long bangs brushed over her lashes with every blow from the gentle breeze.

"The Dream Realm, is famous for its many paths that lead to all the other realms." Vincent continued to explain. He brought his own axe close to his face and eyed the blade for unseen bits of wood. "No other realm can take a soul from one place to the other that easily. For example, one that is about to die, can be taken to Valhalla or Helheim after closing its eyes and fall asleep."

Astrid glanced back at him, "Like, what happened to

\_you\_?"

Vincent's eyes darted uncontrollably for a second. Unsure of what to answer at first, he nodded and between quick gags said, "Y-yes dear. I-I fell asleep and my soul drifted away in a dream, straight to Valhalla. Let us not speak about such a sad moment for now, alright?"

Feeling like her dad was somehow trying to avoid the subject with her, Astrid curled her brows mysteriously at him, then shrugged it off, drew her axe back and then threw it at a pine tree.

"But, dad, why can't I ask you the kind of things I'd naturally would want to ask?" She speaks while walking to the tree to get her axe back. Both of her hands took a firm hold of the axe's handle and then pulled it out of the trunk. "Feels as if something is forcing me to keep my lips shut. Like, when I last saw Hiccup and Stoick. I wanted to tell him where I was, but I couldn't. It was like my words were being \_limited\_."

"Ah, yes. That is one of the things I wanted to talk to you about." Vincent said. Walking over to where she was as he speaks, "Every realm has its own rules. Have you ever experienced that in a dream, you might see things that naturally would form part of your wish list? Now and then have one that originates from your own anger or even from fears?"

She thinks about it for a second, "Well, yeah. Sometimes. Why?"

"Dreams, are mostly product of ones innermost desires, fears, anger, and emotions overall. Yet, the dream realm may also be seen as a land from which various paths to other realms connect." He explains. "There are dream guards that make sure that the rules in this realm are not violated. One of those rules, is to send a message from a soul that still hasn't been called into judgement by the gods, to another. That, is why whenever you tried to tell young Hiccup where you were, the wind sealed your lips and only allowed you to say \_enough\_."

"Hm, it kinda makes sense now." She says. "I think."

"Another fact in this realm, is that if a privilege is granted to two souls to meet in a dream, then they are only to see an image of one another as how they \_last saw them.\_ For example, I know that you are carrying a child in your womb, because I come from Valhalla and have been watching over your every step ever since my soul fled from my body. But, I also know that you didn't have the chance to tell Hiccup the news. This means, that in dreams, he will only see you as how he remembers you. Your clothes might change, but \_not\_ your image."

Astrid's free hand ghosted to her now flat stomach, "But, \_I \_know that I am with child, yet last time I had a bump and now I \_don't\_."

"That, is because last time, your heart was excited to know that there was a child in there, yet you were scared to lose it due to the circumstances. Deep inside, your heart craved to see that things were alright. Therefore you \_saw\_ and \_felt\_ a bump. Now, you do not see

or feel one because the reality is that you do not have one \_just yet.\_"

She chuckles, "Sounds a little complicated, but I think I have a solid idea on what I'm facing right now." Looks up at him, smiling brightly, "You know, I am really glad I get to see you. At least in my dreams."

Vincent's free hand rested on her shoulder and gripped on her affectionately, "Aye, me too, my dear. Me too. You, are my pride. You have brought the Hofferson name to the top and never showed any fear into sacrificing your own freedom for the sake of your people."

Knowing exactly what he meant by saying that, Astrid's lips weakened and the smile she had been showing for a while, faded away. "Yeah, um, thanks dad. Means a lot to me to hear that but," Pulls away from him and starts walking further into the woods. "All we did, turned out to be \_for nothing\_. It was all just a distraction to get revenge on me and Hiccup. Me, for not being the kind of child Bertha always wanted to give you, and Hiccup forâ€"well, \_who knows what is the excuse\_ Dagur has this time for getting revenge on Hiccup. Maybe he just wants to amuse himself. Everything we've worked for in the past few months, have only been part of a chess game played by Bertha and Dagur. D-deep inside, I feel so angered that I'd like to do something really bad to make her pay for making us all look like fools, but, at the same time, I feel like I \_don't\_ have the rights to stand up against her."

"Astrid."

By the time she had turned around, Vincent was standing right next to her. His eyes lost in the ground before them as his voice began sounding very much less excited. As if, needles pierced his throat every time he meant to speak, "There are many, \_many\_ things you are yet to learn from your mother. Things I cannot tell you, but that you have to discover on your own." He turns to face her, letting his axe fall to the ground by his feet and bringing both of his hands to her shoulders. "What you fear, right now, has \_nothing\_ to do with your mother's betrayal. Am I wrong?"

Astrid's head fell to the right. Feeling as if her father had just seen right through her.

Being her silence his answer, Vincent took in a deep breath and pulled his hands away from her. At the feeling of her shoulders being free from his hold, Astrid's feet moved forward and her eyes caught the image of a crystal clear river that began to take form about six feet away from her.

"When we got married, Hiccup asked me to one day gift us a child that resembled me in many ways." She says, "At first, I wasn't sure on what to answer. It wasn't the best time to think about having a family of our own. We were just being threatened by another tribe and we had to think about all the things we had to do before the time came for battle. Carrying a child in the middle of a war meant to risk the life of a defenseless creature. I knew I would never forgive myself if something ever happened to our child. So the only answer he got from me, was, \_one day\_. " sighs aloud, "Now, I don't know what to do. I mean, what if its already too late? What if Berthaâ€"

"What if." Vincent interrupts her, "\_What if\_, is just another way to welcome \_fear\_ into our lives and stop us from expecting the mysterious future that awaits for its time to come. What happened in the past, \_is history\_. Now, you are to \_fight\_ for the present that you have," He pauses to place a hand on her flat stomach, "â€"which is \_this\_ child. The product of true love. This child, is your present, Astrid. If you are willing to fight for this child's life at all cost, then you should not be concerned about all the \_what ifs\_. Pulls his hand from her stomach and points his forefinger at her chest, "There is a heart in that chest of yours, and a heart carries \_feelings\_. Moves his finger up to point at her forehead, "Inside your head, there is a brain and a brain, carries \_emotions\_. Every creature with a soul has feelings and emotions. You, have been taught to hold them back and only use those that might be useful to you. \_Courage\_, is one of them. But I must say, that you were taught with wickedness involved for there is \_nothing\_ \_wrong\_ with feeling sad or ashamed. To \_fear\_, we \_all\_ fear of something in our life. There is no law against having those kinds of feelings. To show tears every now and then, does not mean that you are weak. It means that you have a heart that feels and a brain that has emotions. Do you understand, Astrid?"

Astrid hesitated to answer. She didn't expect to hear any of that. She was so used to people telling her that weakness meant to feel afraid or sad, that she didn't know another definition for such things yet her very own father basically tells her that those are emotions and feelings created to be used every once in a while. Why was he telling her this? She didn't know for sure. However, she knew that she had to treasure his words and meditate on them.

As she gave it time to think his words through, her feet slowly moved forward. Vincent watched her move and when his eyes saw where her feet were actually guiding her to, his big hand grasped on her arm and yanked her back. "Astrid, get away from that river!"

The crystal clear river that had started to form just a few feet from them, now looked like a dark waterway that went on and on into the distance.

Vincent's hold brought Astrid into his arms and as her eyes fell to the river's waters, both of her hands rested on her father's chest. "What is that?" she asks.

Vincent frowns, "You have been asleep for too long. It is time for you to go back."

Astrid pulls away, just enough to look up at her father, "Wait, what? No, I don't want to leave."

Vincent snickered, "My dear, still not learning anything about the Dream Realm, huh?"

"What?"

"This, is a timeless place. Like I said, you have been asleep for too long and must go back to your own present. Those waters belong to the River of Lost Souls. When they appear in the Realm of Dreams, it means that the soul of the person that is dreaming has spent far too much time away. If you touch those waters, your soul will be trapped

in them and you will \_never\_ be able to return."

"No," The words fly out of her as her body was drawn closer to her father's as if to keep herself from going anywhere near the dark waters. "H-how am I supposed to go back? And when will I see \_you\_ again?"

Vincent looks down at her, places a hand under her chin and lifts her face up so their eyes would meet, "Astrid,"

"Yes?"

"You are \_more than what I ever wanted\_ in a child of mine. You, have grown into a very beautiful, smart, tough and brave warrior. I could never feel prouder."

"Dad?"

His lips touch her forehead and as he slowly pulls away, both of their bodies start to fade away, "Goodbye, my dearest daughter. I love you \_very\_ \_much\_!"

"Father, wait!" Her blurry image clings to him, but as the seconds went by, it only felt as if she was grasping on thin air, "Dad!"

"Now, listen to my words, my dear Astrid." He speaks, even when his image had completely disappeared and hers was still slowly fading away, "\_Wake up\_."

"Huh!? Dad!" She turns around, trying to find him. The light surrounding her turned into darkness and soon, there were no trees, no river, no meadow. Only pitch black, and the faraway voice of her father.

"\_Open your eyes.\_" His voice, now a whisper. "\_Astrid, open your eyes.\_"

Once Vincent's body appeared whole in the room with the looking pool he shared with his chief in Valhalla, Stoick the Vast"who stood from the pool's borders"grabbed a big Rock from the ground, drew his arm back and then threw the rock at Vincent's head.

\_BOING! \_

The rock bounced on Vincent's head and fell to the ground in half. Astrid's father shook his head back into his senses and as he rubbed his hand on his head, he walked over to his chief, "Oi, yo"

"Borehead!" Stoick interrupted him. His tight frown looking like he would make the walls around them shake at any moment. "I warned you \_not\_ to let the situation slip out of hand, did I not?!"

"What are yeh talking about? I sent her back in time, didn't I?"

"No, you did \_not\_!" Stoick growls, "She is lost in an unknown dimension right now because the stream of lost souls found hers wandering timelessly in the realm of dreams." Moves aside and points

at the looking pool, "Now, do us all a favor and finish what you started." Pauses, his voice sounding even deeper, "Take \_my\_ daughter-in-law back to where she belongs."

"Aye, yes, yes. Of course I will." Vincent rolled his eyes and then stood in front of the looking pool.

Stoick went to stand next to his friend. Still keeping his angry stare at him.

Vincent leaned a little forward and soon the waters turned into Astrid's sleeping body laying on a wide bed. In the room she and Ruffnut were taken to by Radames after escaping the cell.

Taking in a deep breath, Vincent's exhale mixed into soft whispers "Wake up, now. Astrid, open your eyes my dear." His right hand moved forward and touched the waters. Dipping his fingers in and moving them sideways.

\_Open. Your. Eyes.\_

\_Astrid.\_

\_Open your eyes.\_

Brows curl down into a frown, "Mmnhn."

"\_Open your eyes\_." Whispers again. His voice mixing up with a soft melody that started to sound louder by the second.

Eyelids move up. Eyes, the color of sapphire shine under the dim light provided by the few candle sticks lit in a large room.

\_Where am I?\_â€"she thought. Unable to make her lips part away and release some words.â€"\_Am I in some kind of other dream? Did I not make it back to my body? Mmmâ€|why does my back feel so good? So comfyâ€|mmâ€|\_

Her shoulders moved back and forth. Feeling in the comfiness of a mattress beneath her and the warmth of a thick blanket over her.

As her eyes moved to her surroundings, they saw golden curtains drawn to block the sun's rays from intruding. She found herself in a room with a beautiful glass chandelier hanging from the ceiling and a closedâ€"whiteâ€"double door with golden handles in the shape of a slightly bent tree.

A hand was brought up to her forehead, "Mm, for being a dream, I feel really heavy." raises a brow. Just then, her eyes moved to her right, where a bag filled with a strange and colorful liquid hung from a cloak hanger. The bag had a thin tube that as her eyes followed where it led to, her other hand pushed the covers away and saw that the tube was connected to her arm. "What theâ€"

Immediately, she pulled the tube out of her flesh and saw a long needle coming out and drawing a few drops of blood from her arm. "Hey!" She yells. Her eyes moved down to herself once she felt a soft breeze touch the skin of her now exposed arms and noticed what she was wearing a thin-strapped satin white nightgown.



While in panic, both of her hands found the center of her chest as she sat up and desperately looked around. A rush of quick calmness poured down on her once her eyes found her father's dagger laying neatly on a night table by her side. She leaned to grab it and then held it close to her chest. Letting out a strong sigh.

"Where in Odin's den am I?" She asks herself. Swinging her legs to the bed's edge and standing up, Astrid then tiptoed further into the room. Finding herself standing in front of a women's vanity with an oval-shaped mirror.

Astrid's eyes widened at the sight of her golden hair all perfectly brushed down over her shoulders and brushing against her back. "W-who dared to strip me down and loosen my hair without my consent!?"

Just as she was about to start running off like a lunatic in search for raw answers, the corner of her eye fell to the reflection of her own stomach. Her hands loosened their grip on the dagger and gently placed it down on the dresser. When her hands came back up, they gripped on the gown and slowly pulled it up until her stomach was exposed.

Eyes widened and jaw dropped as soon as she saw a dark purple bruise that took almost all of her stomach and abdomen. One hand took hold of the gown while the other started to brush against the uneven color of her skin. "D-did I?" Her words shaky, "Baby, did\_ I \_do this to you?"

The thought of these bruises being the product of fighting during the battle while carrying a child, was inevitable. Though, when her eyes began to travel all along the image of her body in the mirror, she also noticed that there was an almost completely healed scratch across her cheek. Gauze wrapped around her upper arm and right thigh. Her body leaned forward, finding the faded color of her cheeks already rushing back to normal. "This is strange," She whispers to herself, "I feel really energetic."

Just then, her right hand found a yellow note on the mirror's side. She took it and brought it closer to read its contents,

\_\*\*Please put on the clothes by the door. \*\*\_

That's all the note said.

Astrid glanced at the door and spotted a long-sleeved, dark blue tunic and black leggings neatly folded on a chair near said door. Not really thinking about it twice, she left the note on the vanity, let go of the grip on her gown and went over to the chair with the folded clothes. She took a hold of the tunic and eyes it first.

"And my old clothes?" She asked herself.

A white band-roll fell to her feet as she grabbed the leggings with the other hand and brought them up, over her head to search them up. Placing the leggings and tunic back on the chair, Astrid kneeled to grab the roll and a risky smirk spread across her lips. "\_Breast bands\_," She mumbles, not really waiting another second to strip off the nightgown and start covering her breasts with them.

Already completely dressed, Astrid walked back to the vanity and

noticed that a black leathered belt hung from the mirror. The belt resembled the one she had been wearing in her dreams. With a bronze dragon emblem in it. She took the belt and feeling as if it was actually meant for her, she wrapped it around her waist. She then grabbed her dagger and tied it to the belt "on her left side.

"Whoever brought me here, doesn't seem to have any intentions in killing me," Pauses, "Yet." Corrects, then shakes head back and forth, "Otherwise, he or she would have already taken my father's dagger away and killed me with it. Or at least he could've hide it from me. But no, it was well placed by my side."

Her eyes studied the items on the vanity. A golden box of jewels, a golden hairbrush next to a wooden comb, hair ties, hair clips, and a hand mirror in the shape of a golden rose.

"There is a lot of gold here," she thought.

Taking in a deep breath, Astrid took the hairbrush and started to brush her hair over her left shoulder. Impressed by how long it was. Yet still confused by everything she was now seeing. "Dream or no dream, anything is better than that cell."

As her hands worked on a tight braid, her ears allowed in a rather soft and enjoyable melody that came from the gentle cords of a harp, and flew its way through the small gaps from the curtains of the room's window.

"...Tlun, tlun, tlin, tlun, tlin, tlun, tlin" the melody went. From high, to low and then high again.

Astrid's fingers fixed the hair tie around the ends of her braid and then her heels turned to the melody's direction. Feeling her body be drawn by it, as she reached the closed curtains of the room. Her right hand slowly pushed the curtains aside and her body moved forward.

Stepping out into a terrace, the light of a stunningly red dawn troubled her sight. Instantly bringing a hand up to protect her eyes from the light, she took in a deep breath and counted to five before opening her eyes again, blinking several times and then bringing her hand back down. The floors felt cold, for her bare feet stepped on white polished porcelain tiles. The skies were scarlet red and the sun was peeking its way out of a sheet of gray clouds. But, it wasn't the yellow sun she was used to. No, this sun, was as red as a ruby.

The melody then became a lot louder. Stealing her attention away from the sun as her eyes landed on a young woman sitting on a chair, playing the harp that rested between her legs.

The distance between Astrid and the lady was about fifteen feet.

The woman had long "loose" silver hair. She was wearing a dark olive green gown with hanging sleeves. The dress featured a tight fit and the double lacing down the front and the back made it look like she could tighten it more to her liking. Most of her breasts showed and a thin golden necklace in the shape of a heart-locket adorned her pale chest. The dress covered her feet even when the harp was right between her legs. Her sleeves moved as she made her fingers gracefully dance on the harp's cords. Her eyes were closed, but there

was a pleasant smile marked on her lips. On her head, lied a thin-golden crown with small autumn leaves all around it. The crown had a graceful curvature that ended on her glabella, as it pointed downwards.

"\_tlin, tlin, tlin, tlin, tlin, tlin, tlin\_" the melody continues. As Astrid's feet slowly walked closer, the woman's lips parted and a song rather familiar to Astrid's ears was heard, "lo-li-lo-ley, lo-lee-lay-lei\_" \_

"Lay down your head, and I'll sing you a lullaby. Back to the years of lo-lii-lay-ley. And I'll sing you to sleep, and I'll sing you tomorrow. Bless you with love for the road that you go\_" \_

As the woman's voice continued singing, Astrid's knees had unconsciously bent and her bum met the floors. Her legs crossed knee over ankle and her left hand rested on her lower abdomen. Letting the lullaby make her forget the facts that she was in a strange place, seeing a strange woman play a lullaby she was very well familiar with.

The woman's eyes opened, she turned her head to look at Astrid and smiled dearly down at her. She then looked down at her still moving fingertips as a small star came out from them and started to dance along with her fingers for a few seconds, then fly to Astrid's direction.

Startled, Astrid stood on her feet and dodged the star. But said star turned into a much smaller lady that would fit in Astrid's hand. The lady in white robes skipped up Astrid's arm and jumped to land on her shoulder and up on her head. There, laid on her stomach, brought her legs up and then started to play with Astrid's bangs.

Laughing"not really helping it"Astrid tried not to move her head so much. Thinking that if she did, then the little lady would fall off and hurt herself.

The little lady then stood up and hopped from Astrid's head. Turning back into a star right before Astrid's eyes and then disappeared into Astrid's abdomen.

Astrid's left hand pressed against her belly, as if to trap the little lady. But she caught nothing.

The woman playing the harp still watched them.

Astounded, Astrid signals at her, "H-how did you do that?"

The lady's fingers stopped pulling from the strings. Releasing a soft laughter, she moved the harp a little forward and stood up. She then carefully laid the harp against the wall and then dusted on her dress's frontal side before walking toward Astrid. "Everyone knows how to do \_that\_." she responds.

"Uh, no, they don't." Astrid says. Starting to think this woman was rather crazy. "I've never heard of someone being able to do such a thing, unless you're a witch."

"\_Dryad\_." She says, correcting her, "Not a witch. Witches are usually soulless creatures occupying a mortal's body."

"Dryadâ€|" Astrid mumbled to herself. Wondering when was the last time she heard that word.

Stories about how dryads lived for centuries now flowed back to her memories. When she was a child, she was told that dryads were sent by Sifâ€"the goddess of harvestâ€"and Vidarâ€"the Silent godâ€"to bring beautiful melody to the tree's roots so trees would grow as tall and strong pillars that decorated the lands. But, she didn't think these stories were actually true. She always believed these stories were made only to keep children from causing trouble to their parents and have them well entertained for a few hours while the stories were narrated.

Noticing how deep in thought Astrid had allowed herself to be in such a quick instant, the lady in front of her stepped closer. Taking Astrid aback by the words that were then released from the dryad's gentle lips, "I mean no harm, \_Astrid\_."

"Not meaning to sound or \_be\_ rude at all, but, \_I'll\_ be the judge of who means harm to me and who doesn't. And, how is it that you know \_my\_ name?"

"You have been asleep for an entire day. I suppose there are a lot of energies waiting to be spent, am I wrong?" Offers her a hand.

Astrid stared down at the lady's hand with a brow raised and her lips pushed forward. Not really convinced about this one.

Seeing her reaction, the lady released another quick laugh and then slightly bowed her head after pulling her hand back. "Forgive me for being so rude and forget my manners. My name, is Daria."

Astrid nods once, "Nice to meet you, Daria." pauses "â€"I guess," mutters.

"Likewise. I have been waiting for you to wake up ever since you and your friend were brought here."

"Speaking of which, where is she?" Astrid asks.

"Just fine, must I say." Daria says, "She actually seems like she is enjoying her time here." Glances down the railings to spot two horses racing on the field.

Astrid followed Daria's eyes and saw Ruffnut riding a beige-colored horse. She was laughing and screaming encouragement at a man that followed after her on a black horse.

"He, is my brother. Radames." Daria speaks, "He was the one who brought the two of you here."

Astrid looks up at her, "And where are we? If I may ask,"

Daria didn't respond as quickly as Astrid would hope to have an answer. She only stared kindly at the girl before taking in a deep breath and releasing it along with her answer, "This, is \_Hoffnaan\_." raises a hand, signaling their bright skies and forest rich in vegetation. Her eyes fell back on Astrid, "Try not to digest it all at once." starts to walk forward and past her, "Follow me,

please."

Astrid rose a brow as her eyes followed Daria's movements. Seeing how she disappeared back into the room Astrid just came from. Wondering if the woman lacked of some manners or if that was just the way she was. In the end, Astrid's feet began to move forward, yet they stopped at the terrace's entrance where her eyes fell on a pair of beige furred boots standing neatly under the curtains that now danced back and forth with every wind-blow. "Oh, my boots!" She mumbled to herself, not thinking twice to slide her feet in and then glance at her surroundings.

Daria opened both room doors and turned halfway to find Astrid getting closer. "Come, quickly."

At the sound of Daria's urge to be followed, Astrid's feet forced a halt. Unsure of whether this was just another trick and that another trap awaited.

I've had enough with the surprises,â€"she thoughtâ€" I've already chopped a jerk's head off, I don't think it'll hurt doing it a second time. \_

Unconsciously, Astrid's hand moved to her hip. Resting her fingers on the dagger's pommel before following Daria out of the room.

\* \* \*

><p>"Okay, bud, we should get going. So far, we have been in three different islands and still no sign of Astrid, Ruffnut or Eret. Time to move on before midday."<p>

Tying the laces of his trousers, then fixing his shirt, Hiccup walked out of the cave he and Toothless had spent the night in.

Hiccup turned to see his dragon now going up to him with Astrid's doll in his mouth.

Tilting his head to the side, Hiccup's right hand took the doll from his dragon's gums and removed any trace of saliva from it. "Astrid's doll? You brought this from home!?"

The doll Matlus had brought Astrid from the island of Icso, had been neatly placed by Astrid herself on the night table by her side of the bed. No one had touched it ever since.

Toothless shrugged and continued walking. Few more seconds full of silence made the Night Fury halt his steps and turn back at his rider.

Despite the confusion, Hiccup shrugged a shoulder and went over to where Toothless stood. "Can't exactly tell the importance of bringing something that could get us both killed by an angry Astrid, but, what the heck? It's already here, right? We just have to make sure we don't lose it."

Toothless nodded in fair agreement and then turned his back on his rider as he waited for Hiccup to climb on his back.

Hiccup's wound had closed up enough to allow him to walk around the

place without having sudden stings that would send him back to bed for a few more hours. He had been regularly changing the bands around his torso and made sure not to skip too many meals. Yes, there was still a slight stingy feeling that came in every once in a while. But it was usually bearable—enough to let him continue his search.

It was early in the morning when he left Berk. Far too early for anyone to be awake, to be quite frank. Hiccup knew his mother had gone out since the night before, which only made it easier for him to leave the house without risking the chance of anyone noticing. Deep in his heart, he knew he shouldn't waste anymore time in staying in bed and wait to hear some good news. Or better, to see Astrid barging in and scold him for not being careful enough and breaking his promise.

Leaving to search for her as soon as possible, was the only thought that occupied his mind from the second he heard that she was missing.

"Come on, Toothless." He sighs aloud, gazing up at the cloudy skies, "Who knows? We might have better luck this time." mumbles, climbs on Toothless' back, hooks his prosthetic foot on the saddle and then moves the pedal backwards. In no more than three seconds later, Toothless was already flying through the clouds.

## 25. Like Good Ol' Days

**\*\*Soon after Radames, Ruffnut and Astrid escaped the cell\*\***

"Gaah!" A table was flipped over by two strong hands. All of it's food and mead on the floor.

Two guards were standing on either side of a wooden door, in a stoned room where the only lighting came from two torches hanging on the northern and southern walls. Both guards shared a frightened glance before turning back to face their angry chief.

"\_How\_, could it be so hard to keep an eye on two chained women?" their chief's voice became louder and much more irritant. His back to the guards as he continued speaking, "especially, when one of them was with her defenses on almost \_zero\_. Can someone tell me, \_why\_ on Earth was it so difficult to watch over the two weirdos with awesome powers? Hhm?! \_Why\_, would anyone in its sane judgement would ever lie to me and say that their energy was drained enough to keep them from using their powers and escape?" Turns around and tosses a plate away. Breaking it on one of the guard's head, having him sway side to side before holding his head still with both hands.

"T-t-thâ€b-but master Dagur," The other guard spoke, "We \_did\_ make sure the boy \_and\_ girl's powers remained low enough for it to be safe for us."

"Then \_how\_ would you explain my angry mood?! Am I just getting irked for no good reason?" Dagur steps closer, "Do you have \_any\_ idea on how long I've been waiting to finally get my hands on something that is precious to brother Hiccup so that I could smash it into pieces and then see the pain in his eyes? And now that I finally had that chance, some empty-headed turtles dare to ruin it!"

"N-no-now what are we going to do, master Dagur?" The guard dares to ask.

Just when Dagur was about to grip on the guard's tunic and probably beat him down until unconscious, his eyebrows rose after a quick idea popped into his head. His shoulders lowered, his hands released the guard and his feet then stepped backwards. The fingers of his right hand found his chin, scratching on it as he moved his eyes all around the place. Thinking.

"We, are not going to do anything." Dagur says.

The guard raises a brow in confusion, "Excuse me, sir?"

"Shhh!" Dagur hurries, pressing two fingers on his right temple, "Your voice disturbs my thoughts." pauses, then starts to mumble to himself, "With the girl really gone, it would be a lot easier for brother Hiccup to believe that something tragic happened to her." releases a quick gasp, digs his hand into his left pocket and pulls out Astrid's forehead-band. Eyes it from edge to edge and then starts to emit a manic laughter, "Hmhmhm, hohohoâ€|Now that I think of it, her gone isn't so bad after all. Oh, no, it isn't." Grasps the band, "Hahahaha! Come! Come brother Hiccup! Come and I will tell you all kinds of tormenting things about the wonderful times I spent here with your lovely lady! Come now!" slowly rubs the band against his cheek, down his neck, to his chest, back up to his lips and slightly biting on it.

"Even if you don't believe me, you will waste seconds thinking about it. Those seconds, will take you straight to your grave. Mmm hohoho! Come to me, brother."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Present Time<strong>

Although the sun was shining bright against the back of his wings, and the feeling of piercing the skies like there was no tomorrow became as real as it once was in the past, the Night Fury still couldn't help himself from glancing from time to time back at his silent rider.

It was odd. Normally, Hiccup would talk about all kinds of things while on Toothless' back, he would be all excited for being able to feel like he could race the wind or even see new things while in the air. But, not todayâ€|not any day since they left Berk.

Today, Hiccup's eyebrows remained stressed and his right hand wouldn't seem to unglue itself from his chest anytime soon.

Seeing him like this, only worried Toothless even more than what he already was. He wouldn't be just thinking about how bad he felt for leaving Stormfly behind, but also, how his rider was truly feeling actually took a lot of space in the Night Fury's thoughts. Making him growl within, while his eyes remained on his rider. Hoping he would be heard.

And he was heard. Hiccup's eyes blinked. Snapping out of it, he looked down at Toothless and at the sight of his dragon's forced smile, Hiccup released the deep breath he didn't even realize he had

been holding for so long. "I'm sorry, bud. Guess I'm letting myself go off and down again, huh?"

"Groooooâ€|" Toothless tilted his head backwards,

Hiccup rested his other hand on Toothless' head and rubbed him gently.

At the sudden vibe of not being just the two of them anymore, Toothless' head moved sideways while his eyes searched through the dense clouds that had formed a carpet below them.

"What is it, bud?" Hiccup asks, "Do you hear something?"

Toothless growled lowly and shook his head, as if to hush Hiccup for a quick second when a red Monstrous Nightmare flew upwards right in front of them, circled twice above them and then glided to be on their level. "Think you could have all the fun?"

The all-too-familiar-voice of his shameless cousin Snotlout and Hookfang's growl of agreement pulled a surprised feeling out of both Hiccup, and Toothless.

"Snotlout? Hookfang? What are you two doing here?" Hiccup asks,

"Didn't you hear me earlier? Did you really think you and Toothless could just take off when no one expects you to and go after a crazy woman that doesn't feel sorry for pulling the shit out of her enemies and a beautiful princess that would probably be crying for my helpâ€"all by yourself!?" Snotlout said.

Hiccup rose a brow, but before he could say anything about it, another male's voice spoke up as he and his two-headed dragon approached them from below, "Hope you're not referring to my sister as \_a princess,\_"

When Hiccup glanced down, he saw Tuffnut frowning up at Snotlout. "Tuff!" he calls, "You managed to ride Barf and Belch without Ruff's help. And without causing them to try and go on different directions. I'm amazed!"

Tuffnut brought his shoulders back and pushed his chin up in utter pride, "Yeah? Well, thank you. I do tend to amaze people. Shows how awesome I am. Me alone. Without the need of a yellow papaya head replacing my shadow. Yep. Only me."

"You know Tuffnut? Something tells me, you're \_not\_ that enthusiastic about this trip." Fishlegs commented as he and Meatlug appeared on Hiccup's other side. "I hope you realize that we are going after both Astrid's \_and\_ Ruffnut's trace."

"Ugh, don't remind me." Tuffnut's body seemed to have deflated once Fishlegs reminded him of the reason why they were flying so early in the morning in the first place. "For once in my life, I can breath an air I don't have to share with Ruff for more than two days." Points up at all three riders with a finger, "Did you know, my own shadow came back to me? It ran away when Ruff tried to fart on it when we were kids."



All three other riders shared a conflicted glance as they heard the male twin, yet, they weren't exactly that taken aback by Tuffnut's ways of speech. In all honesty, Hiccup was actually glad that he and Toothless weren't going on such a journey all by themselves. It almost felt like the old times, when they used to take off and explore new places together. The only difference now, was that they were a lot older—and that two of them were missing.

"Um, Hiccup?"

Fishlegs' suddenly worried voice broke Hiccup's chain of thought apart. "Yes, Fishlegs?"

"I know how important this search is to you—and to us too but—remember, your wound is still not completely closed and dried. Your constant moving has made the healing process a lot slower." Fishlegs says, "We cannot risk flying our dragons for long hours. Your back is usually arched forward when riding Toothless, and that can cause the wound to reopen."

Hiccup nods, rolling his eyes. Expecting to hear another lecture even while away from home. "If in two hours, we don't get any good results from our search, then we find a place to stretch our legs for a bit. Okay? Besides, Toothless and I have done pretty well for the past few days on our own since we left Berk."

Snotlout shrugs, "Whatever dude, it's you're funeral."

Hiccup shook his head back and forth. Without any permission from his brain, words just flew out of his mouth with a drop of bother in every one of them, "Guys, how do you expect me to stay still in a bed, doing absolutely nothing while watching my friends do their very best to keep me from harming myself any further and no less, knowing that Astrid, the girl I've been in love with all my life and finally get to marry is somewhere out there where only Odin knows what she is going through? Do you honestly think I would stay still?"

"Figured he'd say something like that—" Snotlout mutters to himself, crossing both arms over his chest. "Hate it when he speaks reason."

"Heard that." Hiccup said, took in a deep breath and slowly released it. Letting his shoulders relax for at least a few short seconds as he glanced down at a big green bag tied to Barf and Belch's back. The bag was big enough to fit four Terrible Terrors and probably a little more. "Um, Tuff?" Hiccup calls, "What is it that you have in there?"

"Oh, this?" Tuff asks, signaling the bag, "Fishlegs said to take as much as we need for a long trip."

"And a big bag for just one Tuffnut?" Snotlout asks. "Is your bed in there too?"

"I tried. But it was too big," Tuffnut's shoulders fell in disappointment as he sighed helplessly for a moment, then looked straight ahead, "This bag, holds treasures for this handsome guy over here" points at himself with both thumbs, "treasures that not even in a million years you'd be considered as worthy enough to take a look

at them"

Both, Hiccup and Fishlegs, shared a bemused expression as they listened to the blond twin speak. Fishlegs opened his mouth to say something when Snotlout hurried himself in first, directing his words back at Tuffnut.

"Let me guess," Snotlout interrupts, "Your \_special\_ pillow is in there, isn't it?"

Tuffnut gasped in shock, "How'd you know?" frowns then, pointing up at him, "Have you been spying on me, mister?!"

"What? Pffftz, please. I wouldn't waste my precious time spying on an idiot like you." Snotlout answers.

Tuff crosses his arms over his chest, turning his head away and closing his eyes. "Well, since you think spying on \_this\_ idiot is a waste of your oh so called precious time, then I guess you don't mind me keeping \_and\_ eating all the yak butter parfait I brought, right?"

Snotlout's eyes widened, "Seriously!?"

Tuffnut only nods.

"Guys, knock it off already." Hiccup squeezes himself in before the subject goes meaninglessly further, "Can we just, \_not\_ start with the usual nonsense so early in the morning? Please? We need to focus on where we are heading."

"Why us?" Snotlout asks, "Our dragons know exactly where to go, don't they?"

"I wouldn't be so sure about that. It's been days since Ruffnut, Astrid and Eret disappeared. Their trail won't be as fresh and as clear as it would if we started tracking them down on the same day they went missing." Fishlegs informed.

"Fresh or not, we can't let our guard down." Hiccup said.

Hours passed. Long ones filled with nothing more than the sole hope of finding a place that would at least feed their hopes in finding the other three missing dragon riders. Hiccup had promised two hours of nonstop flying, but time went by so fast that they didn't realize how long it took them to finally notice that the sun was almost at its highest point in the sky.

It was then, when Toothless's eyes widened, his ears moved up and his body inclined left.

"What is it, bud?" Hiccup asks, "Did you hear something?"

Toothless didn't growl an answer. He just focused his glare down at the clouds beneath them.

Without a second thought to it, Hiccup leaned forward and encouraged Toothless go on through the sheet of clouds. Finding an island getting closer and bigger by the minute as they flew down toward it.

"Oh, good thinking Toothless!" Snotlout cheered, "Finally a place to stretch my legs and catch a nap."

"We're not sure if this island is the right place for us to rest, Snotlout. Don't keep your hopes up." Fishlegs said.

"Shut up, Fishlegs." Snotlout snaps, "You'll ruin the moment."

Finally landing on the island, Hiccup dismounted Toothless first, but remained by his dragon's side as he gazed at their surroundings. The beach was short, for the trees that would welcome them into a deep forest weren't so far from them. Silence embraced them. No breeze, no sound other than the one that came from calm, salty waters crawling closer to their feet, and then being dragged away.

From where they stood, the forest before them took the image of a cave made out of wood instead of rock and countless green leaves for a roof. Just like any other cave, the insides looked dark, inhabited and simply undesirable to stay in for a long time.

Almost as if moving on their own, Hiccup's legs stepped forward. "Let's go, gang."

"What!? Are you nuts?!" Snotlout complains, "Have you noticed how dark and creepy that forest looks!?"

"Don't tell me that you're afraid of what's in there." Tuffnut mocks, starting to follow Hiccup. He turned on his heel and walked backwards, facing Snotlout who soon followed shortly after, "Hehehe, there must be giant snakes waiting for their meal to finally arrive. Have you seen any of those things? They are huge, almost the size of a Green Death. Manly vikings are their favorite."

"Tuffnut," Fishlegs pouts, "There is no such thing as a a snake the size of a Green Death and if there ever \_was\_ a snake the size of a Green Death, then we would have probably been eaten by now."

"Oh yeah!?" Tuffnut glares at the Ingberman, "What if theâ€"

"Shhh!" Hiccup hurries. Halting his steps, he inhaled deeply through his nostrils, opening his mouth to let it go. "Do you smell that?"

Fishlegs stands next to Hiccup. Sniffing the dead air around them. Eyes open wide after identifying such smell, "\_Firewood\_."

Hiccup nods, "There must be others around here."

Tuffnut sighs aloud, "Oh, great. We found my sister already. Woohooâ€|" sarcasm flooding from his every word as he vaguely waved both of his arms up in circles at his face-level. "Can't really show how exhilarated I feel."

"What if it's a huge beast with five heads and eight tongues that will get angry at seeing us and will turn us all into abalones?" Snotlout says as they all continue walking ahead.

"Snotlout, there is no such thing as aâ€"

"Sqaawnk! Sqaawnk!"

Hiccup's words were cut off short by a loudâ€"and very much insistentâ€"squawk that came from behind them and sounded a lot louder as it got closer to them.

Toothless, was the one to slightly jump on his paws and then hurry back to the beach. He stood on two paws, showed his gums and growled cheerfully at the clouds.

From the clouds, emerged a sky-blue Deadly Nadder that soon landed behind Toothless. Both dragons bobbed their heads before Toothless would push his nose against the Deadly Nadder's throat and then rub against her scales affectionately.

"Stormfly!" Hiccup called, hurrying back to the dragons that soon were joined by the Hideous Zippleback and the Gronckle. His hands stretched to check her wing. Seeing that she had no splints that limited her wing movement.

"She must have tracked us down all the way from Berk." Fishlegs said as he gets closer to join Hiccup in admiring the dragon's completely healed wing. "Impressive!"

"Pfft, how can it be impressive?" Snotlout crosses both arms over his chest, "Stormfly is a Tracker Class dragon. I see nothing impressive from that."

"Being able to fly on such a long distance after a wing injury must have been a true challenge for her." Fishlegs informed.

Even as Fishlegs and Snotlout continued debating on what was normal for a dragon to do and what was logical for one that was recently injured, Hiccup managed to completely ignore their voices as he got closer to the Deadly Nadder. Brushing his hands up the scales of her wing and to her chin. Rubbing her as his face got closer to hers, "Astrid will be really happy to see you." He whispers to her. Hearing her low growls of resentment as she leaned her head forward and moved her cheek against his own. Understanding her, Hiccup's fingers rubbed her a little faster as ways of comfort, "Now, now. Don't feel so down. It's not your fault. I bet that she is just fine and impatient to see you again."

"And if she's \_dead\_?" Snotlout's words made it clear to Hiccup that his voice wasn't heard by just Stormfly. At the sound of his dry question, Stormfly abruptly pulled back from Hiccup's hold and flapped her wings three times before flipping her tail upwards.

"Down!" Hiccup yelled and everyone crouched down, hands on their heads.

Spines rained down on them. Meatlug stood in front of Fishlegs as two spines bounced against the Gronckle's hard-as-rock skin and fell to the sand by her feet. Tuffnut jumped behind Barf and Belch's body as three spines flew over him and pushed his helmet off his head.

Hookfang rolled his eyes and ran away from Snotlout's intention to

use him as a shield. Having him understand that if he was going to mess with the Deadly Nadder, then Hookfang wouldn't be part of it. Fortunately for Snotlout, one spine darted on the sand, only centimeters from his elbow.

Hiccup had been cocooned by Toothless and the sound of a loud "Ow!" made the boy peek out from his Night Fury's wing.

Tuffnut's head rose from the Zippleback's sides. His eyes focused on the now moving big bag well tied to his dragon's back. "Um, okay. I think it's time for me to acknowledge that I have been hearing weird things like a girl's voice coming from my bag of supplies, for example."

Hiccup glanced at Stormfly first. The female dragon was already facing the forest when Toothless silently approached her.

\_Good thinking, bud\_â€"Hiccup thoughtâ€"\_keep her calm while I deal with these guys. As usualâ€"|\_

Half of a spine was inside the bag's upper side. As the guys slowly stepped closer to the bag, a pointy metal stuck out of the bag and in less than two seconds, the bag was tore open by a blade. "Damn, it almost got right through my shoulder!" A young female said as she managed to get out of the now empty bag and stepped on the sand. Taking about half a minute to regain her balance as she pushed her bangs off her eyes.

The girl was almost as tall as Tuffnut. Slim, tonedâ€"and exposedâ€"arm muscles, long legs, thin and pinkish lips, long eyelashes, big eyes the shade of pure cobalt, rosy cheeks that contrasted with the paleness of her skin. Small, pointy nose. Her apple-red hair was well brushed to a high ponytail with braids around her hair tie and a single braid that reached her lower back. Her bangs were trimmed to the eyelashes and angled down at the temples. She was wearing black leggings, dark grey crude skirt, and a sleeveless smokey-shaded tunic.

The girl didn't hesitate in fixing her posture and offer her hand out to Tuffnutâ€"who was closest to her. "Hey, there!" shows a bright and almost-too-perfect denture, "My name is Rei." Takes Tuff's hand and shakes it politely, "Rei Eldur." ads, pulling her hand from Tuffnut's hold and turning to Snotlout, offering her hand out to him next,

Tuffnut's eyelids felt numb over his eyes as he watched her, then he straightened his back and pushed his chest forward. Deepening his voice, "Sir Tuffnut Thorston! My pleasure pretty lady. Hmhm, \_my\_pleasureâ€"|"

"Snotlout. No offense, but," Snotlout holds her hand and gives her a quick shake, "I've never heard the name Rei Eldur before."

"Of course you haven't." Rei responds as she shook Fishlegs' hand and then turned on her heel to face Hiccup. "I come from Chief Souzbog's tribe."

"Oh, chief Souzbog you say?" Fishlegs asks, instantly interested. "How is the chief? Is he well? Oh, and I'm Fishlegs, by the way."

Rei shrugs a shoulder, "Can't tell. I didn't stay for long enough to check on him."

"I-I'm sorry," Hiccup finally speaks in, "But what were you doing in Tuffnut's bag? How long have you been in there?"

"Oh, yeah!" Tuffnut said, hurrying to his bag and dig both hands in, followed by his head. "Hey, where are all my stuff!? This thing is empty!"

"What!?" Snotlout gasps, running to the male twin and then digging his own hands in the bag. "But-but-but-but," looks back up at Tuffnut, "What about my yak butter parfait?"

"Forget about the food, I was seriously looking forward into setting a bunch of traps for when we find my sister." Tuffnut said, then shrugs, "Well, if we find her alive, that is."

"Guys!" Hiccup snaps back at them with an irritated glare, "Quit saying that. You'll upset Stormfly again."

"Huge difference between Astrid and my sis, Hiccup." Tuffnut points out, "Surprises me how you doubt such a thing,"

"I don'tâ€"arg! Would you just, limit the times you mention their name near Stormfly? Please?" Hiccup said.

"Seriously, you twoâ€"|" Fishlegs said, "Try to stand on her claws. She feels really bad for what happened. The least we want is to make her feel worse."

Before Tuffnut and Snotlout would say something else, Hiccup sighed aloud and turned back to Rei, "Forgive them. You were saying? Did you get hurt by any of the spines that rained down on us earlier?"

"Oh, no. Don't apologize." Rei rushed in, shaking both hands in front of her chest. "I'm fine. Honestly." glances over her shoulder at the bag, then back at Hiccup, "I was looking for a place to spend the night and found that bag in the dragon stables so I emptied it and got in. When I woke up, I realized I was already flying across the ocean."

"Why didn't you tell us you were there?" Hiccup asks.

Rei lowers her gaze, slightly ashamed, "I-I feared you might throw me down to the waters or something. So I stayed in without causing any suspicions until the Deadly Nadder's spine pierced the bag and startled me."

"Well, now you don't need to hide anymore." Hiccup steps closer, signaling himself with a finger, "My name is Hiccup. Chief of Berk. You'll be safe with us."

Rei's cheeks got suddenly darker, "Thanks, Hiccup. I really appreciate it."

"Say, I have become quite curious," Fishlegs says as he walks on Rei's other side, "Your name sounds rather unique."

"It is." Rei laughs, "It means\_ beautiful fire\_. My mom thought it suited me for being the only child she could bear."

"Aah, the name suits you alright." Snotlout says as he followed after them, eyeing the girl's backside from braid to boot as she walked.

As their steps guided them deeper into the forest, the sky seemed to have vanished thanks to all the tall trees surrounding them. Squirrels dashing on the ground, straight to their nests and back out to search for food. The boys seemed to be enjoying this new stranger's company, since they wouldn't stop asking her questions that would either cross the line of nonsense, or that thin line that led to personal-matters.

Nevertheless, Hiccup's steps remained heavy and silent. His gaze down at the ground as he went, a hand hanging on his side while the other rested below his chest. Trying all that was possible to keep his thoughts from paying any attention to the burning sensation that had started to devour his insides. He needed to sit down—near a stream if possible—and check on his wound. They have been flying for long hours and he'd been ignoring the stingy feeling that started a few minutes after they landed.

Deep in his heart, he knew Astrid would get really pissed off at him for being negligent and let his wound delay so much in healing. Thinking how it was much more important for him to have her right in front of him once again, was actually the root of his bore-head behavior.

\_All I'd give to see you again, Astrid.\_"He thought."\_to remind myself that our marriage and all the things we did afterwards weren't just part of a dream. To touch you, and have you in my arms again. At least, once more...\_

"Hiccup, look." Fishlegs' voice came just in time to interrupt Hiccup's painful train of thought that only made him feel like the right to breathe had been snatched away from him.

Keeping a straight face, to avoid revealing how he truly felt, Hiccup followed Fishlegs' gaze. Seeing that someone had gathered a bunch of rocks, formed a perfect circle with them and then started a fire in the center. On an old, fallen tree there was a fishing net and a pile of red apples neatly placed on the ground.

"Chief?"

The call filled with surprise and disbelief in its tone had Hiccup's shoulders flinch for a quick second before he'd turn around, only to find \_Eret\_ standing a few feet from him, holding firewood in both of his bare arms.

The guy was shirtless. Exposing not only the scar Drago Bloodfist had given him, but also some quite nasty battle marks on his arms, back and neck that looked like they weren't treated properly.

Eret walked past them and threw the firewood into the fire so the flames would last a little longer. Skullcrusher stayed behind. Laying comfortably by the Hideous Zippleback.

"Eret," Hiccup said. "Are you alright?"

"I am." Eret didn't even hesitate in responding. "I have been here for a about a week by now." Sits on the fallen tree trunk, by the fishing net.

Hiccup leaned back against a tree nearby. Even while leaning back against the tree, his torso throbbed nonstop. Making it less easier to focus on any other matter aside from thinking that it was soon time to change the bandsâ€”again.

While the rest of the gang got comfortable around the fire, Hiccup's eyes started to impatiently move around the place.

Noticing his focus in searching for something that clearly wasn't there, Eret took in a deep breath and exhaled with his low voice tangled in, "\_She\_ isn't here."

Hearing him, Hiccup glanced back down at him. "Where, then?"

Eret shook his head back and forth, his eyes fell to the fire. Not daring to look straight at his chief's eyes, "I don't know." pauses, "It looked like she was sucked in by a green flash. Skullcrusher and I didn't back down. We tracked her down, but her trace disappears in this island. If we search any further, then we get either too far or too close to her scent. There is an abandoned castle far north. But it seems to be underground since all you can see from it, is the top of a tower."

"Have you though on searching the castle?" Hiccup asks.

Eret nods, "I thought about having Skullcrusher blast the tower away but I figured it would block our only way inside. The job isn't as easy as it sounds when it comes to just one man and his dragon."

"In that case, take us to the castle tomorrow morning and we will all figure out a way to get in without having it fall down on us." Hiccup instructed.

Eretâ€”finallyâ€”glanced up at his chief, forced his lips to stretch a smile of gratitude and then stood up on his feet. "We \_will\_ find her,"

Hiccup turns his head to the side. Trying to hide the pain in his eyes from anyone that would intend to look closer at him, "I know." Was all he managed to say when Fishlegs stood up and walked up to Hiccup. Holding a roll of clean bands.

"Hiccup," He calls, "Let's check on that wound, shall we?" Fishlegs seemed to not have fallen into Hiccup's intention to fool everyone into thinking he wasn't feeling bothered by the wound.

Not even feeling the strengths to respond with words, Hiccup just nodded and pushed himself to stand straight. Fishlegs silently followed his friend as they walked to a more private area.

When the chief was nowhere to be seen, Eret sat back down and picked four apples from the ground. "Whose up for a snack?" He asks, throwing an apple at Snotlout and Tuffnut.



"You know," Tuffnut speaks, "My sister is also missing." takes a bite of the apple.

"She is?" Eret asks.

Tuffnut nods, "Yup," Mouthful, "We all seriously thought she was with you and Astrid."

"Probably with Astrid, but not with me." Eret assured. Glancing at the girl sitting silently by Snotlout's left. His brows furrowed in curiosity as he studied her figure. Having this unusual feeling that he had seen this young maiden before.

But she wouldn't look at him. Her eyes remained in the fire and both of her hands rested on her lap until Eret threw an apple at her and without the need to look up, her right hand caught the apple, brought it down to her lap, wiped it clean and then took a bite out of it.

Eret's shoulders moved up and down. Trying to have his arm muscles relax for a few minutes as he continued looking at her. "Who are you, strange lady?" he asked himself in low mutters. Bringing his apple slowly up to his mouth and digging his teeth in. Unable to shake off the feeling of her presence not being the most adequate for the moment.

## 26. The Sanctuary

"Good thing that what's left of that creepy wound is now only a scratch. Otherwise you'd still be bleeding." Fishlegs spoke as he wrung a wet white cloth over the soil to his right. Fainted pink drops of water fell from the cloth and disappeared into the dark ground. "It would have dried already if it weren't for your constant moving from here to there. Applying ceaseless pressure slows the healing process, Hiccup. I've grown tired of telling you that."

Focusing so much on tending to Hiccup's chest-cut, Fishlegs barely even noticed how Hiccup wasn't exactly paying much attention to his scoldings. The young chief's eyes were lost in the bright emerald green color of grass to his left. He was sitting on a rock, a broad tree behind him whose beautifully leafy branches inclined a few feet over his head. Shirtless—was he—while letting Fishlegs wipe the tiny dots of blood from around the scar's top edge.

It was the second time Fishlegs helped Hiccup with changing his bands—Today. Now, it was already evening and still no sign of Astrid \_or\_ Ruffnut.

\_If you are not here, safe, and with Eret—Hiccup thought—then, where are you Astrid? \_

Clearly, his high hopes of hearing Eret tell him how he found Astrid's location flew away the moment the sailor confessed otherwise. Causing his mind to focus on the same question that has been taking over him from the moment he lost sight of her back in battle, \_where could she be\_?

"Hiccup?" The hand that soon shook Hiccup's right arm made him

realize he had been spacing out for far longer than usual this time.

Pain, mixed with sorrow and confusion and a hint of disorientation filled Hiccup's shamrock eyes. The moonlight didn't seem to be on Hiccup's side at all, for it only made him look even more downhearted than what he actually was. Fishlegs' mouth opened to give way for words when he noticed how lost his friend's eyes were. "Even after gaining back his attention. It was then, that Fishlegs understood how difficult this was for Hiccup to take in.

Hiccup probably didn't realize his eyes were actually telling a whole heart-wrenching story, so Fishlegs' lips sealed back together and both of his shoulders fell. Knowing that it was best for him to keep what Hiccup's eyes were saying to himself. In the end, Fishlegs looked down at his lap, where his hands were as they held Hiccup's folded red tunic over a black fur cloak. He offered them to his old friend and while still not bringing himself to look back up at him, he says "Please make sure to get a decent amount of sleep tonight."

With that, Fishlegs stood up from the ground, dusted his bum and then silently left his young chief and old friend by himself.

Walking straight back to their camp, Toothless appeared in front of Fishlegs, making him halt his steps to kindly pet on the Night Fury's head before continuing his way to the others.

Toothless watched Fishlegs leave. Tilting his head to the side and trying not to drop the item trapped in his gums. Toothless then turned back to where his rider was and continued his way toward him.

Hiccup was already standing on both feet by the rock and effortlessly sliding his arms through the tunic's sleeves when Toothless pushed his nose against his right thigh. Hiccup rose a brow as soon as he noticed what his dragon was carrying in his mouth, "What do you have there, bud?" stretches a hand to him, patiently waiting until Toothless carefully released the doll on Hiccup's hand.

No doubt, there was dragon saliva almost all over it. Hiccup took in a rather difficult deep breath as his other hand gently wiped the saliva off the doll's yellow hair and his bum sat back on the rock.

All this time, Hiccup had secured the doll in the bag of supplies they carried with them. Now, it laid in his hands. Smiling up at him as if she was telling him not to worry so much about things. "exactly what he knew Astrid would say.

"Can't help it, Toothless!" Hiccup whispers, "Why do I have this feeling that there is more going on? Much more, than we could ever imagine."

Toothless tilted his head to the side, blinked twice and then laid his chin on Hiccup's lap.

Even though Hiccup knew Toothless was just trying to somehow comfort him, his eyes didn't move away from the doll's features. His thumb slowly moving up and down on her chest. Unable to keep himself from

stretching his lips into a faint smile "Vincent really did hit the spot, didn't he?" the forefinger of his other hand traced over the doll's blue button eyes, "â€"she looks \_almost\_ like Astrid."

"Grou?" Toothless moves his head to get a closer look at the doll, then back at Hiccup. Raising a confused brow at him.

"Heh," Hiccup chuckles, "Between you and me?" leans closer to his dragon, then whispers, "Astrid is \_a lot\_ prettier."

Toothless pulled back in shock at his rider, then wagged his browsâ€"teasing him.

Hiccup laughed, this time not being able to hold it back anymore. His eyes landed back on the doll. The same forefinger that traced her blue button eyes traveled down her sides and over her stomach. Slowly moving the doll sideways under the moonlight to get a better look at it. Turning the doll around, Hiccup's fingers felt it's softness as they slid down her back, then up again until a rough spot right on the seam that kept her clothes attached to the body made contact with his fingertip. "Wait a second," Bringing the doll closer to his eyes, Hiccup noticed that there were red stitches over the ones that naturally keep the doll's insides well kept. "Is it supposed to be like this?"

Seeing an unusual pattern, Hiccup couldn't help the needs to pull out the dagger from his belt and gently cut the red stitches out.

Curiosity was taking him way too far. As soon as the red string was out, the doll's side slightly opened. Revealing what looked like a yellow paper roll. Pulling theâ€"really smallâ€"piece of paper completely out, "What in the name of Thorâ€"|"

Unrolling the piece of paper, Hiccup reads the symbols that could be barely readable considering the years it had been stored inside the dollâ€"and the dragon saliva the doll just absorbed.

\*\*\_My dear Astrid, \_\*\*

\*\*\_Please remember, forgiveness is power. \_\*\*

\*\*\_I love you immensely. \_\*\*

\*\*\_Father, \_\*\*

"A note from Vincent Hofferson inside Astrid's childhood doll." Hiccup mumbles, "I wonder why would Vincent hide a note in a doll on the first place. Should he know something that would have him desire for Astrid to forgive so badly?"

Consumed by a great amount of perplexity, Hiccup's gaze lifted to find the full moon shining so bright, it opaqued all the other stars around her. Craving not only to see a solution to the bundle of mysteries that had been presented to their lives for once and all, but to be able to see \_her\_ once more.

\* \* \*

><p>About an hour before dawn, Hiccup had found a stream not so far from their camp. He had woken up before everyone else for he has had so much trouble finding a way to fall asleep without being bothered by his own endless thoughts. Of course, his struggles to give said thoughts a rest, was beyond impossible at the moment. By the time he realized it would take a lot more than just a cool breeze that gracefully moved the leaves side to side and the sounds of owl bringing life to the night, Hiccup's body had become restless.<p>

He made sure not to make too much noise while he stepped away from the camp. He very well knew the dragons needed the sleep more than what he did.

Bending over, splashing fresh water on his face, rubbing the knuckles against his closed eyelids, and then kneeling on the small stones beneath as the water now reached over his shoulders. Standing straight again, feeling quick drops rolling down the bare skin of his back, trying to let his thoughts become serene like the water as he threw some of it against his chest, ran a hand down his thighs and back up.

Completely unaware of a pair of two curious blue eyes gazing at him from behind the tree's shadows. Admiring every single detail Frigga may have allowed to be seen from his bareness, Rei's eyes wandered everywhere and nowhere at the same time, unable to think straight as she had troubles to figure out the reasons behind doubts of how can a slim body be so perfectly toned.

He didn't look like he'd enjoy a good fight, but he surely wasn't going to let someone take advantage of him. His features looked so masculine, yet, like the kind of man that would always lay a gentle touch on a fair lady. Wet auburn hair-ends glued to the skin over his cervical vertebrae. Drops that shone from the morning sun ray's light as they rolled down his arms, sides, hipsâ€œ

"Got you," Harsh whispers startled her ears as a strong palm pressed on her lips, her body being brought back over a wide chest and her feet soon struggled against the ground as they were being dragged backwards.

Before long, her mouth was released. Two hands turned her body around and then pushed her back against a tree. Her chin was forced to move upwards as a big forearm was placed across the skin of her neck. Her eyes blinked a few quick times in shock before recognizing the man that held her still with all of his careless strength against the wood while his other hand grasped on her hip and his right knee pressed against the wood, keeping her legs slightly parted. As if to make it much more difficult for her to free herself. "Eret,"

By the sound of his name coming from her voice, Eret's wonders were immediately confirmed. But he didn't let such a thing have him lower his guard. He decided to push the question he was actually supposed to, first, "What do you think you are doing? That's the chief you were spying on. Have you not learned any manners?"

Struggling to have him loosen his grip on herâ€œbut failing at itâ€œ", Rei said, "I mean no harm."

"How will I be sure? All I've seen is treason haunting us like a lost demon for the past few days." Eret muttered.

"Eret, please." Rei waggles her shoulders, "I swear, I mean no harm."

After seconds of just silence between them, Rei gave up on struggling against his strong hold and simply stopped moving. Her teeth found her lower lip and soon, began to slightly chew on it. Her eyes wandered all over his face, allowing every detail of him make her chest feel heavier as the seconds went by. Finally, her lips parted to make way for a low, yet nostalgic voice, "I thought you wouldn't recognize me."

Eret hesitated, wondering if it was or wasn't the best idea to lower his guard. As if on its own, the grip on her hip started to loosen and his arm under her chin lowered to her shoulder and then away from the heat of her body. "How can I ever forget?" Even though his voice sounded almost far too low to be heard, Eret's head shook in realization, cleared his throat and then with a much stronger voice, he asked, "What the hel are you doing here?"

Rei let out a loud sigh, "It's a long stoâ€"

"I have the time." Eret quickly hurried in. Not even letting her finish the sentence. Stepping away from her, giving her a fair amount of distance and personal space, he watched how she rose a finger to the edges of her lips and scratched them before taking in a deep breath and looking away from him.

"As you wish, then." She says, "I became part of Lord Souzbog's clan shortly after being sent away by your father. Lord Souzbog's servants took me in as a slave but as time went by, Lord Souzbog saw a fighting potential in me and had me training as a shield maiden. He offered me a home, education and all three daily meals. I could never be more grateful. When a group of men came to Larlis with their dragons, I couldn't resist myself from overhearing how desperate their tribe was. Souzbog didn't think it twice before he called his leaders in and commanded them to gather his strongest men and women, getting them ready to set sail. Of course, I squeezed myself in."

"Don't you have a family to take care of, instead of selling your life to death like this?" Eret asks.

"No." Rei simply answered, "I got married to one of Souzbog's most trusted soldiers but he died in one of the battles against the ogres that serve as a plague in Larlis."

"Ogres?" Eret rose a brow,

"Yes." She says, "Aren't there any on Berk?"

Eret shook his head, "Not ogres. But trolls, apparently." He shrugs carelessly, "Not that I have seen one myself."

"Well, they are a real pain in the ass if you ask me." Rei mutters, more to herself.

Eret then looks back at her, "What about your children? Would you leave them motherless as well?"

"I have none." She says.

Eret gagged at first, "Impossible. I heard word of you with three children already."

"Lies." Rei affirms. Before he could say something else, she hurried her words out, "I got married two days before the battle against the ogres. I didn't conceive. Timing wouldn't allow us to have the chance."

Eret releases an inner mocking giggle, "The man just didn't know how to shoot a blank, that is."

Seeing how Rei kept a straight face at his comment, Eret shrugged his shoulders and turned to glance away.

That was when Rei's steps got closer to him, feeling the urges to change the subject for once and all. Desiring to get to the part she was longing to ever since she saw him for the very first time in long years. As she stretched a hand to reach for his jawline, she said, "You have grown very handsome."

Instinctively, Eret slapped her hand away. Peering into her eyes, "\_He\_ is a married man, you know?"

Clearly, Eret wasn't a man of letting important matters slip away so easily. Even if great part of his thoughts have always been occupied by her image, Eret wouldn't simply allow anyone to disrespect his friends. No matter \_who\_ it was.

Rei's lips stretched into a teasing grin that was completely foreign to his memories about her. When the words escaped her lips and climbed up his ears, piercing from one to the other, Eret realized that there was something really different about the Rei he once fell in love for. "Being married, never stopped a man or woman from having some adventurous slips. Am I wrong?" She said.

"No." Eret confirmed, then his voice turned rather commanding, yet he kept it low enough as to avoid any disrespect toward a lady, "Even though that is true, \_respect\_ \_him\_ while he is still your chief as you stay around him."

Without even waiting for her to respond, Eret walked past her and headed straight back to the camp.

Rei froze for a few seconds by his last words, then she shook her head and quickly followed him, "Say, Eret? His wife isn't here, is she?" pauses, "Who other than \_you\_ may be able to misunderstand my intentions so fast?"

"Then be wise and don't let anyone else misunderstand you." He made sure she stayed fairly behind him.

"How is she like?" Rei asks, sounding far more curious than what she intended to be. "Are we searching for her?"

"Why would you want to know? You'll see her soon anyway."

Rei's lips curled in disappointment and her cheeks inflated as she realized she wasn't going anywhere she'd want to in a conversation

with him if he didn't trust her. And it was expected. They hadn't seen each other in years and apparently, Eret had faced too much throughout life that would make him much more cautious on who exactly would he gift his trust to.

Nothing more was said between them on their way back to the camp. Letting it be the birds chirping around them and the sound of broken leaves being stepped on as they walked be the only noise around them for a while.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Astrid<strong>

Our way out of the strange room I just woke up from only took us to a long corridor of stoned walls and closed double wooden doors all the way down. All the doors we passed by looked the same, so it was clearly hard to tell which door led to where unless you were very well familiar with the place. The only lighting that kept us from tripping over something on our way out, were the lit torches on either side of the walls and some chandeliers here and thereâ€œon much wider spaces.

As we walked, I noticed quite a few women stop doing whatever it was they were up to, just to stand still and watch me send them a serious stare right back at them. The way these women were dressed, wasn't exactly honoring the code of decency I was familiar with. Their dresses were so tight on their torso that their carelessly loose hair would get lost in their cleavage. Of course, their figure was somewhat alluring, yet it wasn't something I would wear.

Some gifted me fainted smiles, while others just kept staring at me like I was some kind of prostitute walking her way to the king's bedchambers.

As I gave myself a chance to appreciate the details surrounding me, I noticed that there were no paintings on the walls. The decoration was simple, and very elegant. Every window had white curtains. Tables were made out of white marble and the pillars had a delicate vine wrapped around them. Making the room look a lot livelier.

The weird girl whose name apparently was Daria, didn't say another word while she made me follow her outside. I did notice that as we walked, the women that we encountered slightly bowed their head to her.

After about three more minutes of just a silent walk, we faced two large double doors with golden handles. Daria raised both hands to her chest-level, pushed the doors open and continued walking. As I stepped outside, the piercing sunlight attacked my eyelids, having me instinctively raise both hands over my eyes to protect them while they adjusted to the strong light I hadn't been able to face for a while. The sun was now definitely much brighter than when I woke up and heard Daria play at the terrace.

While it, a cheerful and quite distantly familiar laughter filled my ears. Glaring, I lowered my hands and turned my head to where the sound came from. On the field, two horses raced one by the other until a beige one trotted ahead from the black one and a blonde girl waved both arms up in the air as she yelled to the skies, "I

won!"

The male riding the black horse caught up with her and as he laughed at her enthusiasm, he slightly bowed his head and said, "Fair race. As agreed, two pounds for the winner." he untied a small brown pouch from his belt and tossed it at her.

The girl caught the pouch and held it close to her chest before bouncing it on her palm to make sure it was the amount he actually claimed it was.

When I had a better look at the girl, realizing who she was, I gasped, "Ruffnut?"

Hearing my call, she glanced over her shoulder at me. Her eyes widened in shock but her legs didn't wait to swing over the horse and have her soon hop down. She ran towards me and halted her steps just a few feet away from me. "Well, well!" she said, her teeth showing, "Look who finally decided to wake up from her beauty sleep." Before I would even think of what to say to her, she hurried in by tossing the pouch at me, "Did you see? I just won two pounds of gold."

"I see!" I mumbled in response, still trying to digest everything at once while I lightly bounced the pouch in my right hand to confirm the weight. Yep, two pounds alright.

Tossing the pouch back at her, I glanced around and asked again, "Where are we?"

"Hoffnaan." Ruffnut simply responded. "Didn't Daria tell you already?" clicks her tongue, regretfully looking away, "Man, that girl sure is slow."

Actually, Daria did tell me where we were. I just didn't quite believe her. But I couldn't tell Ruffnut that right now. There were far more important questions in my head that needed an answer right away. Ruffnut probably wasn't the best one to rely on for a logical explanation but to tell you the truth? She is the only one here that I can actually trust right now—or, am I mistaking the meaning of trust? Ah, true, I was betrayed by the one person I always hoped for at least a tiny bit of care from. How am I supposed to determine whether I know what trust is if I feel so empty inside?

Then I am reminded that Ruffnut, could be a mutton head but definitely not a backstabber. So, in other fair words, I think I can still rely on her. After all, she did stand up for me when I couldn't find the courage to do it myself—I owe her this much. And here she was, acting as if this was just another morning when we used to meet up at the Dragon Academy for training.

"Shall we move along?" Daria's voice blew away any chances Ruffnut and I had to spill questions to one another.

When I glanced back at Daria, a tall guy with long-dark gray hair and sweet honey-colored eyes stood right by her side. He moved his hand under hers so her fingers could rest on the back of his hand—ever so delicately.

Daria beckoned at us. Ruffnut didn't even hesitate to move toward them. I gagged as I watched her give in so easily. But that didn't



stop my feet from moving forward without my brain's consent. Soon after, I was walking beside Ruffnut as we followed Dariaâ€”and the weird guy that walked straighter than a wax-doll.

"Who is he?" I whispered at Ruffnut, still keeping my eyes on the guy's straight back.

"Huh?" it only took Ruffnut a few short seconds to realize I was asking about the tall-one holding Daria's hand. "Oh, his name is Radames." she shrugs, "Supposedly, they are siblings." Leans closer to me to lower her whisper, "But I don't believe them since they act like a married couple."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, he is awfully nice to her all the time and she looks at him like she would kiss him on the lips anytime soon." She said.

"Oh," Definitely, not the kind of siblings we are used to.

"Actually," Ruffnut began, "His hair used to be as white as a cloud. Shortly after we got here, the shade on his hair started to darken. Weird, huh?"

I rose a brow at her but then decided to believe she was just trying to amuse herself by speaking nonsenseâ€”as usual. Right before I could bring myself to ask her something else as we all walked our way deeper into the woods, Ruffnut said, "Soooâ€”" takes in a deep breath and releases her words along with it, "I'm really glad you finally woke up. You were starting to scare the shit out of me."

"Was I out that long?" I asked.

She nods, "A whole day. Radames and Daria tried to make me believe you were just sleeping but, it wasn't exactly that easy to accomplish."

"Any idea on why I was out so long?" I asked. Finding it terribly hard to believe what my ears were hearing.

"Did you see the bag that was connected to your body through a tube?"

I nodded, waiting for her to just continue talking. And she did, "Well, Radames said that the solution in it was meant to take away all the impurities from your body. They both said that your body would allow you to wake up once it feels that it has been healed properly."

"Heal from what exactly?" I ask.

Ruffnut shrugs, "How should I know? You're the one with a freaky mom. You should know what she has been giving to you in order to get you in this position."

And she was right. Unbelievably right, must I say. No matter how much we knew about everything that has been going on lately, one thing was certain, Bertha had been planning it all. For what reason exactly? According to what she said, she had always been jealous of the

affection I received from my father. But how is that my fault!? How was I to know that my own mother would allow something that was left way in the past take her to control her daughter's life as if she was a puppet?

Yeah, the facts got me really angry, but I can't just go to her and kill her for this. It justâ€¦it wouldn't be right. And this is exactly what confuses me so much. What am I supposed to do when I face her next time?

You know what?\_ I don't know\_ and right now, I can't possibly think of something other than the one thing that occupies a great amount of my thoughtsâ€”\_My baby.\_

Did I hurt it while in battle? These bruises on my stomach, do they send a bad message I should be paying more attention to? Should weâ€”

"Um, I suppose you saw them alreadyâ€¦" Ruffnut's voice made me snap out of my inner babble and realize that she was gazing at the hand that had absently moved to rest on my lower abdomen. How long was I rubbing myself like that?

Then she said, "The bruises, I mean."

My eyes jumped back up at her. Before I could ask her how would she know about them, she hurried in, "Don't get me wrong. I was just making sure no one tried anything funny with you while being on la-la-land all naked."

"What have they done to me while unconscious?" I ask.

"Nothing bad, really. As soon as we got here, you were cleaned up, the maids checked you for possible wounds, and they also disinfected the scratches you got from battle. When I first saw those bruises, I got really freaked out and started flaming out raw insults at everyone inside the room. Radames tried to calm me down by explaining that they were just a reflection of all the impurities stored in your body for the past few years. The solution given to your body was supposed to extract those same impurities through the pores. At first, I couldn't bring myself to believe him. So he and Daria encouraged me to stay with you for a while longer and keep an eye on those bruises. Obviously, I did just that and as the hours passed, I noticed that the color of your skin started to recover it's natural tone and the bruises also got less nasty."

"Sounds partially unbelievable." I said.

Ruffnut nods, "It took me a while to accept the fact that they were only just trying to help."

"How'd you know their true intentions weren't hidden behind simple acts of kindness?" I asked.

"Because when Daria came in to ask me and Radames to go on and stretch our legs, I told her that I wouldn't leave your side, especially since you were unconscious. She assured me that she felt you were going to wake up sooner than expected. She sat to play her harp, so I accepted Radames' invite on horseback riding. Aaand here you are now!" Shrugs, "Think that's enough proof to me." Glances back

at me and shows nearly all of her teeth with a bright smile, "The end!"

It was hard to believe. I have never heard of such a thing before in my life. Yet, this also reminds me the fact that there are still mysteries in our world that we haven't discovered just yet.

"What else did they say about my health?" I asked. Not helping to worry more about the baby than any other matter.

"Not much. I think that's about it." Ruffnut says, scratching her left earlobe. "I don't have all the dirt, you know?"

"Does this mean that the baby will be alright?" I ask.

Ruffnut shrugs, "I'd say, that there is a greater possibility of the little fungus having you pop it out when it's ready to cry its lungs out for some boobie milk." snickers.

At her teasing, I couldn't stop myself from releasing a slight laughter. I'd give up anything to have this baby in my arms and see it breathe the same air as me.

"We are here." Daria interrupted our whispering conversation, almost causing us to stumble on a large log on our wayâ€"which we carefully skipped thenâ€"and have us stand by her.

"And where exactly are we?" I asked, raising a brow at my surroundings. Seeing nothing but trees, and trees, and more trees around us. Just then, the ground beneath me started to tremble. My knees bent slightly, then stretched again as if trying to find a way to keep my body from falling on my butt as the shaking continued. The corner of my eye saw Ruffnut jump away from me and run to stand behind Radames, who held her waist as she grasped on his forearms.

"Oh, no! It won't get me this time." She said.

What was she talking about!? And why do I see Daria and Radames all so calm while the ground shakes?!

As I continued babbling in my head, the ground beneath me broke apart and then I saw myself moving up. My knees fell to the ground. When I was about to jump down, a pair of perfectly rounded eyes peered down at mine. Hushing my every future attempt to scream my confusion out, freezing my every move, and giving me the chance to also pierce my stare into his.

Eyes deep, somber like the night and looking like they were almost being hidden by the rest of his huge light brown face. He had an almond-shaped nose pointing upwards, and a beard taking the form of an old tree's thick and strong roots. On his head, there was a crown that took the shape of thick roots pointing backwards.

As I allowed my eyes to take in all of his facial features, I then noticed that his lips had remained stretched into a smile that showed nothing more than pure tenderness down at me.

"Wooooooooo?" He tilts his head to the right.

Almost as if moving on its own, my head also tilted to the side.

He moved his head straight and then a little backward\_s\_â€"as if about to either approve or disapprove of somethingâ€" when it then moved close enough for me to almost feel his body heat. His nostrils released a strong wind that easily pushed me down on my bum.

Finally able to move my eyes from him, and down to my surroundings, I gasped aloud as I realized how far from the ground I was. How did I even get this far up without noticing?!

As I crawled to the edge of where I was sitting, I saw a big rock in the form of a pointy peak to my far right. My hand slowly moved to touch it. Feeling the ever-so-familiar roughness beneath my fingers, I immediately pulled my hand back and held it close to my chest. I glanced over my shoulder and saw another big rock in the form of a pointy peak, next to another oneâ€"and another one. It was then that I realized that they were \_no rocks\_ with pointy peaks. They were \_claws\_. And not just \_any\_ \_kind\_ of claw. These were a \_dragon's.\_

\_I'm in a dragon's handâ€|\_â€"I thought.

"\_Woouooooo.\_" The creature before me said. Having me look back up at it, then avert my eyes to curiously glance at the rest of its body.

Astounded by its beauty, I crawled forward. Taking a better look at him, I noticed that he had no \_visible\_ wings.â€"his entire back was covered in pine trees that stood slightly backwards.

"Wow," I couldn't control the amazement that was building up inside me.

He lowered his head more to my level and stayed.

Finally, I managed to stand back on my feet. Hesitating and taking in deep breaths as I tried to calm the anxiety lingering as a product of shock and astonishment all mixed up together. My eyelids draped over my eyes and my head turned away from him.

My body then seemed to move on its own. As if by instinct, my left hand slowly rose and stretched.

\_Hiccup... If this has worked on hundreds of dragons for years, then it should also work on this magnificent creature. Right?\_â€" I thought.

Time flew by when I felt a rough but unbelievably warm sensation against my palm.

When I opened my eyes and turned my head to see what my hand was touching, I saw the dragon's maxilla against my palm. His eyes were closed and his breathing was slow and calm. Soon, my own breathing mimicked his, and then both of my palms were resting on his scalesâ€"rubbing on them gently.

"You are so beautiful," I heard myself whisper.

His eyes opened and then his head moved back as he parted his lips.

From his mouth, a bright and golden smoke emerged. The smoke hovered over my head for a few seconds before forming a thin thread that slowly spiraled down to my chest-level and then disappeared right inside me.

"Astrid," Daria's soft voice startled me. Having me turn to the voice's direction and find her sitting on a tree to my near right. She signals up at the dragon with her free hand while the other rested on the tree to help her maintain her balance. "Meet \_Foreverwing\_."

I looked back up at the dragon, "Foreverwing?" I ask. Smiling brightly at him, I stretched my arm back at him to see if he would let me touch him again, "But he didn't move. He just continued looking down at me with that warm smile that just didn't seem to go away any time soon."

"Lower your leggings to your navel and lift your tunic over your bellybutton." Daria says.

"W-what!?" I instantly ask.

Is this woman mad or what?! How would she expect me to do something like that at a moment like this?!

Before I would start complaining, she hurries the words in, "The smoke that just got sucked in by your body." Pauses, "Do you wish to know where it actually went to?"

"Um, I guess? But"

"Then, please." She cuts my words off short. "Do as I just instructed."

The Foreverwing tilted his head to the side, as if waiting for me to do what Daria was asking me to.

Rolling my eyes and sighing aloud, I rolled my legging's hem down below the navel and then slid my tunic upwards until I felt it just a bit over my bellybutton.

"Now," Daria speaks, "Please, look down at yourself."

As I did what she asked me to, my eyes immediately widened as soon as they saw \_what\_ was going on. There were golden dots of light going on and off under my skin. As they went, the bruises on my lower abdomen were turning into a much lighter color.

I must have been dreaming, for my heart wouldn't stop beating so hard against my rib cage.

"Woooooâ€|."

Hearing the Foreverwing, I glanced up at him with a smile that defied the shock that was written all over my face. "Is \_he\_ doing this?"

Of course, the answer was obvious. I just couldn't bring myself to believe it was \_possible\_ just yet. So Daria clicked her tongue. "Now that you met the one responsible for your presence here in Hoffnaan,

I trust that everything else will go on smoothly?"

"After all that has happened in such a short time, I don't think I could be that easily surprised anymore." I assured.

"I am glad to hear that." Daria said as she stood on her feet. The tree extended it's branches in my direction, bringing her to me. She stepped out of the tree and stood right in front of me. Her hands held one another over her stomach. "Before I tell you more, may you please listen to how all this began?"

"Uh, okay?"

She looks back up at the magnificent creature, "I trust, you know that dryads are born from trees and have special abilities. Well, I was born from the Foreverwing's crown. I was granted the gift to learn from unborn creatures that were conceived by the purest act of love. To hear their heart beating in their mother's womb, to see them move and make sure that they grow healthy and strong, is what I was meant to do. When an unborn child that was conceived by an act of the purest kind of love suffers, and I am near, then I will also feel the child's pain like it is my own. When my brother and I were trapped by Master Dagur and his men, we could not defend ourselves as we would want to because our powers are very limited on foreign lands. During the time that we spent as being Master Dagur's slaves, I kept having these strange dreams of a young man. A human. One night, the dream seemed to take place on an icy land, where everyone seemed to be fighting one another. Many dragons where present. Then another man screamed a name—"A Hiccup, if I so remember. Months after that, I heard that Master Dagur had two more prisoners. It was then that I began to feel weaker with each passing day until I realized that I was experiencing exactly what your child was feeling. In the end, I couldn't bring myself to allow it to die. So I asked my brother to use the last of our powers and take you to the Foreverwing. Of course, leaving me there would mean that our night sky would have a new star. I had to perish for not being able to fulfill my duty. After that, there was this wonderfully warm feeling around my body and when my eyes reopened, I had found myself resting on the Foreverwing's back. He gave me a second chance to do what he created me for."

At first, I didn't know how to respond. But there was one part of the story that wouldn't stop making my head spin like a spinning wheel. Suddenly finding it difficult to swallow without chocking on my own saliva, I said, "You mentioned a dream, where you saw dragons and people fighting. You said you heard the name Hiccup being called?"

She didn't look at me for the moment. She just kept her gaze lost on the Foreverwing's features as she continued speaking ever so calmly, "Yes. A much bigger man that called his name, ran toward him and then, the next thing I remember is seeing him under a pile of chunks of ice and the smaller man crying over him."

"What else did you see?" I hurried in.

Daria remains silent for a few seconds. Almost having me feel desperate enough to want to ask her once again—"only louder. But then she took in a deep breath and finally turned to face me, "Nothing. The dream ended there. But later on I continued dreaming of

the boy's image."

Gagging, trying to keep my posture as much as I could, "H-how did he look like?"

"Not too tall." She says, "A little taller than you, that is." Glances at her surroundings, as if searching for words that would make for a better description, "Eyes like the grass. Hair the color of mature autumn leaves." Her eyes fall on mine, "That is all I remember."

Daria's eyes widened. In a quick move she dragged her feet closer to me as her hand took a hold of my elbow. It was then, when I realized I had lost the color of my cheeks once I felt my face get suddenly cold. Shock was written all over me. But I decided not to let it have the best of me and grasped on her arms, hurrying the question in, "Tell me. Did he have a metal leg? Did you hear him speak? If so, then did persistence and an inability to give up drip from his every word?"

Her lips trembled, "W-well, yesâ€¦ I suppose." pauses, "Do you know who he is? What relationship does he have with the Foreverwing?"

"Not sure if he has ever seen the Foreverwing before but, he is my husband, Hiccup! Known as the first young Viking man that would dare to ride a dragon when back then we were trained to kill them." I couldn't help myself. The words were being pushed out of me by the strong heartbeats that barely even let me breathe. "Daria, you have to take me back home. Please!"

"He, is the father of this childâ€¦" As if not even listening to a word I was saying, she pulled away from me and turned her back to me. "But, why would I have dreams of him, if it's you who I have in front of me at this moment?"

"Daria," I called. But she ignores me.

"What has he done to make the Foreverwing desire for your presence so badly? It must have been something truly meaningful."

"Daria," I call again. Clearly, she had no intentions to push her thoughts aside and listen to me for just a quick second. She glanced up at the Foreverwing and then back down at me. As if realizing something, her eyes fell to my stomach.

"Hiccup, has done many meaningful things." I assured, frowning up at her. "Whatever it is the reason the Foreverwing may want to meet him, it can't be because of something bad and second, he won't have him unless you take me and my friend back home."

Daria shook her head in utter disagreement. "No."

"What!?"

"You being here, is not a coincidence nor a mistake. You cannot leave Hoffnaan until the Foreverwing says otherwise." Her voice firm all of the sudden.

"Listen, I have a home to go to. Things to take care of. Take us back, now or else I will find a way on my own."

"Even if you try, you won't be able to leave without the Foreverwing's help." She said.

"Damn it!" My nails digging into the skin of my palms, "Don't you understand? I must go back to Berk! If I don't thenâ€"

"If you don't, then what?"

Her words felt like razors against my sides. Her voice had stopped being as calm and sweet as it once was and now, it was basically mimicking the same anger my voice had in it. Not knowing exactly what to say in return, Daria spoke instead. "Will you be willing to risk your child's life by relying on the kind of people that put you in this position?"

"Wha-who are you to judge!?" I snapped, "You know nothing!"

"I know enough!" Daria points her finger down at my abdomen, "What they have done to you and your child is irreversible in the laws of your world! Laws your people have learned to rely on most of the time, the ones you oh so proudly call science. Where you come from, Astrid, people manipulate nature in other to gain something for their own beneficence. That very same manipulation of nature, is the one that commands you to have a miscarriage and to become unable to conceive ever again. Have you any idea of what has been flowing through your veins for so many months that turned your own body against you as soon as you conceived? No! You do not know because you just woke up from a dream that could have been your one way ticket to Valhalla if it weren't for the works of the Foreverwing! Five more minutes in that godforsaken cell and you wouldn't be here at all!"

Her breathing became short and fast, then, after a few seconds of only silence between us, her chest relaxed and soon her voice changed from agitated, to calm once again, "But here, everything is different. We rely on making the impossible for some to become possible and that is where the Foreverwing steps in. I do not know why he has been so eager to heal you lately and I do not know what is he trying to tell me with all those dreams I've had, but for as long as that baby still grows inside you, I will do my best and fulfill my duty. I will make you be able to hold this baby in your arms in a not so distant future and you will be thankful\_â€"whether you agree with the fact that you have to stay here for the time being or not."

With that, Daria turned her back to me, stepped out of the Foreverwing's palm and when I realized she would fall straight to the far ground below us, I hurried to the hand's edge. Seeing her leaning against an extended tree branch that slowly moved down to the ground and waited for her to step out.

Not really knowing what to think, what to say, or even how to react, I glanced up at the Foreverwing and sighed aloud. Resting my hand on one of his fingers and rubbing it gently, "Thank you, for worrying about me. Would you please put me down now?"

Without even thinking it twice, the Foreverwing growled and then



carefully lowered his hand so I wouldn't lose my balance that easily. Of course, I would have gladly enjoyed the viewâ€”if we were on different circumstances. But honestly? I couldn't bring myself to enjoy anything. My head was still on blank as my heart continued pounding against my throat as if it would make me throw it up at any time soon.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Astrid<strong>

Later that evening, a celebration was held in the Foreverwing's sanctuary in honor of his new guests. Wooden tables were set here and there, with only a few candlesticks on them and the rest of their space was pretty much occupied by abundant food. Unlike the Great Hall, there wasn't a space determined for a special activityâ€”like dancing. Since we were out in the open, people danced wherever they would find enough space for them and children chased one another around the place as they played.

There were lantern cords hanging from tree to tree to bring some more lighting to the place. I could spot a couple of adolescents walk hand in hand away from the crowd and hide behind a big tree. Ruffnut, had been doing what I never even thought I'd ever see her doâ€”to dance nonstop. She wouldn't take a break for food, or to sit down for a few minutes. No. Actually, the breaks she did take were just to grab the first mug of mead she'd see and gulp it down her throat. Also, I noticed that she only danced with Radames, who had not only asked her for a dance as soon as the feast started, but who has basically rejected all other offers from ladies much more attractive than Ruffnut.â€”Weird, I know.

After our little disagreement, Daria and I didn't talk much throughout the day. Seems like she's the kind of person that understands how to not get in my way when I'm not in the mood. My desires were definite. I wanted to go home. I wanted to see Hiccup and warn him about how all the effort we put into preparing ourselves for battle, was literally for nothing since it was all part of Dagur's plans for revenge.

I don't think Hiccup would be too surprised, though. Hiccup knows that Dagur is as obsessive as he is a dart-head soâ€”yeah, you know what I mean.

Earlier, When we got back to the mansion, Daria offered me a white cloak to wear from now on since they were expecting snow anytime soon. The cloak was long enough to brush against the ground as I walked.

Cheerful music played. Daria sat on a rock with her harp well positioned between her legs as her fingers danced delicately over the strings. On either side of her, men played the flute and drums. Another lady gracefully clapped on a tambourine while swaying.

I watched the people dance, young couples share playful glances to one another before sneaking out, an elder man sitting on a log telling a few kids a story, and some other people get drunker by the minute.

My attention was brought down to my legs when I felt a slight tug

from the hems of my cloak. A small boy stood right in front of me. His height reached the middle of my thigh. He was wearing a black long-sleeved tunic, brown trousers and dark furred boots.

He looked up at me with big eyes full of curiosity. Both of his hands were hidden behind his back. I knelt to be more to his level and managed a small smile for him.

"Hello," I say. The boy's dark brown eyes stared deeply at mine. It was then, that I noticed that around the corner of his iris, a bright green glow started to show. "What is your name?"

He didn't answer. He just continued staring at me for some reason, then looked down at the ground. When he glanced back up at me, he had brought his right hand up, holding a white wildflower.

"For me?" I ask. The boy's sudden bright smile and quick nod caused my shoulders to relax as I gave the flower one last look, gently took it from his hands and brought it to my nose. Taking in its scent, all of my insides felt as if they were relaxing in unison. When my eyes found the boy once again, I noticed that his cheeks had turned a bright red.

"Why, thank you." I whispered to him before leaning forward and kissing his forehead.

No one has ever given me flowers before. "Not that I ever wanted anyone to give me flowers" I'd honestly prefer a knife as a gift than a sad flower that would die the next day because I wasn't caring enough to put it in a vase with water.

Yet, receiving one from a child, was a completely different story. It felt as if I had no reason as to leave my guard up.

When I stood back on my feet, holding the flower to my chest, the boy once again held his hands behind his back, bent over, and pecked on my flat belly.

Before I would even say something about it, the boy took two steps backwards and then dashed away. Leaving me there, frozen in the spotlight as I watched him join his friends and attack the food in small groups.

"Children and dragons," Radames' voice shook me out of my trance as I glanced to find him standing on my right "also looking at the children playing. He held both hands behind his back and his shoulders were brought back. "They know before we even come to think of any possibilities."

"Excuse me?" I ask, not really able to understand the meaning behind his words until he turned to face me.

"He gave you a flower and kissed your belly, did he not?" He asks.

"Well, yeah He did." I say, "Why?"

"The flower was just an act of kindness but in our culture, when children kiss a woman's belly and she is expecting a child, then it means good fortune." He said.

"But, how did he know that I am with child?" I ask.

Radames shrugs a shoulder, "Still a mystery. As I said, children and dragons always seem to somehow find out before we do." pauses, "Must be their innocence that lets them see further than what we are allowed to, as grown ups."

"Ahâ€|" I sigh. That explains why Toothless and Stormfly hesitated in leaving my side when I fainted at the Academy. They must have already found out that I was with child.

"Radames!" Ruffnut calls from afar, holding two mugs in her hands as she waved them in the air, "What are you doing over there! Come on, let's go! The night is still young!"

Laughing, Radames nods at her, turns to face me and then slightly bows his head, "Please excuse me, madam Astrid."

I nod, showing him a rather forced smile so he wouldn't think I'd be bothered by how fast he came and left. I have to admit, the guy was nice and very good looking. Apparently, he captured Ruffnut's eye. Heh, I think that \_Eret\_ would be really happy to know that his beloved personal stalker just dumped him for someone else.

According to what I heard from Ruffnut as we shared a conversation earlier today, Radames still hadn't told her what kind of creature he was. We don't know \_how\_ exactly do you make a man like Radames and a dryad a brother and sister, but, considering everything that has been going on around us these past few months, I'd honestly believe \_anything\_.

"\_Astrid!\_"

The all-so-familiar voice of a young man calling my name filled my heart with hopes as my eyes wandered desperately all over the place to locate \_where\_ this voice came from.

"\_Astrid! Haha!\_" There it was again! Laughing, this time. "\_Come, dance with me\_" Then, I saw \_him\_. A faint image of Hiccup pulling a faint image of myself through the crowded place. Guiding her to where most people had gathered to dance.

She didn't look as excited as \_he\_ was. Clearly, she would very much rather have another mug of mead than dance. But he seemed to have managed to have her grant him a dance.

He snaked an arm around her waist and pulled her closer. She laughed, shook her head, pressed both hands on his chest and playfully pushed him away. Just then, she took a hold of both of his hands, laced their fingers together, and started to skip in circles with him.

Laughing, they both jumped together. Guided by the cheerful music that pretty much made their bodies move on their own.

He stepped forward, then moved a step backwards. Repeating the same step two more times before letting go of one of her hands and give her body a turn with the other. Having her stop with her back to him as he wrapped his other hand around her waist and held her close

against him.

He moved away and gave her another turn. She let go of his hands and gracefully swayed her body around his. When she stood in front of him once again, he offered his hand out to her and when she took it, he pulled her in.

Before he would make another move, she stepped away from his embrace and started to walk backwards. Still holding his hands, bringing him with her.

In silence, both figures simply shared sweet and loving smiles as their feet took them to a more private corner. Watching them, I stepped forward once I realized they were headed my way. When I stretched my hand out to touch Hiccup's face, their bodies went right through me.

Turning around to see if they were headed deeper into the woods, I realized that both figures were nowhere to be found.

They disappeared...

"Hiccup!" I heard myself whisper. Wanting to see him, was a fact I couldn't just simply bring myself to deny.

Looking up at the skies, pacing further into the woods, a moon I have never seen before in my life caught my special interest that night. She looked much bigger than the one I am used to see almost every night from Stormfly's back.

So big, I could almost feel like I could touch it with my own hands. "But she shines like a ruby no one was ever allowed to lay a finger on. The color of pure blood, full and rich in indescribable beauty.

It was then, that I realized how far away from home I was "very far\_.

Back in the cell, there was no window that would let me see the moon, or hear the sky cry if it rained. All I could do, was imagine it all. Giving my heart reasons to remain calm, and strengthen my faith into one day setting ourselves free from such a cruel present.

Indeed, we were free. But, our mysterious future seemed to have taken us further than we ever hoped to go. A large part of me is grateful for the fact that if it weren't for the kind of things that in our world aren't possible, then I'd probably forever blame myself for building strong barriers against nearly everyone in my life "except the ones that I really needed to.

Somehow, it wasn't hard for me to believe what Daria said about the baby trying to grow inside me. Perhaps, deep down, I knew it already? Can't really tell! But for some reason, I wasn't surprised.

Mother, no! Bertha, said that I was taking SnowBell without the SnowBell. To be quite frank, I never grew curious to investigate if I was taking the real thing or not simply because I trusted her. I always hoped that there could be some kind of humanity in her "and

at times, I believed I was right.

Seems, like those same high hopes blinded me from the truth. What succeeds in steaming my blood up, is the thought of me being the only one that didn't see it coming.

Now it all makes more sense to me. Valka wanting me to stop taking the SnowBell as soon as I told her who provided me with it; the fake letters written by the same hand and the same pencilâ€"which probably was one of those I borrowed from Hiccup one dayâ€"; Bertha insisting on me making a sacrifice for the sake of an alliance; always looking down to Hiccup as if he was born from disgrace itself; and no less, lying and playing nice at times to relieve me from any suspicion.

Now that I think it through, Gothi said my muscles were only sore when she checked me in front of Hiccup and the others. But, I've known soreness for years and this has absolutely nothing to do with it. Did she say that just to have Hiccup and the others calm down for once? If that's the reason, then it somehow worked. I think.

But, when she insisted in seeing me in private, I knew that there was much more to it. When she told me I was expecting a child, I got so taken aback that I hurried out of her place and relied on the excitement that won over the worries of it being a veryâ€"extremely badâ€"timing for me to be with child. I left too soon. I didn't give Gothi a chance to finish whatever she wanted to tell me.

Why do I get the feeling that she was about to warn me about this?

For centuries, our healers believed that women had the rights to be the first ones to learn the news of the stage of their own health, especially when it comes to expecting a child. After the girl knows every single fact concerning herself, then it was okay to tell others. Otherwise, the healer would most likely cover the truth a little with something that would ease the husband's worries. This kind of act, was sacred not only to the healers, but to everyone that formed part of the village.

Knowing this, now I wonder if I had just stayed a little longer up in Gothi's hut, she would have warned me about what was truly flowing through my veins. But now things are different. I had to go through all that misery in order to meet the Foreverwingâ€"who has been making the impossible, possible.

In all the years we've spent riding dragons and exploring new lands, it never crossed my head that there would be a dragon twice as big as the Bewilderbeast. One that had healing abilities and could make the kind of things that would logically be senseless.

Daria says that I was supposed to experience a miscarriage already. Thinking back, when I had the very first twinge and saw blood all over my inner thighs, I couldn't understand what it meant. Yes, at first, I thought I could blame it on an illness or something. Turns outâ€"like Gothi confirmedâ€"there was no such thing as an illness. My body is far too strong to let a wee illness take me in. And probably, that was why I didn't pop out a dead fetus that night, or any other night after it.

My body has been \_fighting against\_ whatever it was trying to hurt the child I didn't even think was already forming in my womb. My body, \_my strong body\_ was protecting the fetus like a mad beast would if a human tried to do any harm to its cubs... Right?

Motherâ€|no. \_Bertha\_ never thought of that possibility, huh? Well, \_I\_ can. I still believe she has been underestimating my inner strength and relying far too much on her own judgment. Well, \_good then\_. That way, when I come to face her once again, I'd be proud enough to show off a big baby bump to her and say, \_your plan failed\_.

"Yes, her plan will fail." I heard myself say. Gazing still up at the moon, absently rubbing all ten fingers over my flat stomach, "Nothing, do you hear me? \_Nothing\_ can separate us. I will one day have you in my arms, breathing the same air as me. For \_I\_ will sing you to sleep, and sing you tomorrow. To bless you with love, for the road that you go. Because you are your father's child, and mine. There could have never been a better combination."

Just then, two dragons raced across the moon.

\* \* \*

><p>"Ruffnut," Astrid's foot pushed Ruffnut's sleeping shoulder as she forced her voice to be as low as possible for it not to wake anyone up.<p>

The feast had ended about three hours ago. It was still pretty dark out there, and there were a few people sleeping soundly on the floor.

Ruffnut had fallen asleep under a table, holding an empty mug close to her chest.

Astrid, had pushed the table away and now stood next to her friend's sleeping body. Frowning, she tapped her boot on Ruffnut's shoulder. "Ruffnut." Calls again, this time a little louder.

"Raaaâ€"" the female twin snores, turning on her side and holding the mug closer to her chest.

Astrid balled her fists and kneeled. Pinching on Ruffnut's noseâ€"hard enough to make the girl sit up and rub on her nose to stop herself from sneezing anytime soon. "Geesh, what is it now? Can't you see I'm busy dreaming? Just because you slept so long doesn't mean you can deprive me from enjoying a good night sleep."

"You'll have time to dream later." Astrid said, "Now pull yourself together. We are leaving."

Ruffnut sniffed once, then rose a brow up at Astridâ€"who had already started walking away. "Wait, you mean leaving as in, going away?" stands up and hurries after her. "As in, bye bye Hoffnaan? Forever?"

"What other type of leaving is there?" Astrid asked.

Ruffnut shakes her head, moves to stand in front of Astrid and stops her. "Hold up. Astrid, you heard what Daria said. We can't leave until the Foreverwing says so."

"I do not need to wait for someone's approval to make my own decisions." Astrid mutters, stepping aside and continue her march. "I saw dragons further into the forest. We just have to get them to fly us out of here."

## 27. Immeasurable Kindness

"There is something I still don't quite get yet." After long minutes of walking in silence and only allowing the cracking of dead branches under their feet be the one sound that seemed to follow them everywhere they went, Snotlout decided to break the ice with a sudden complain.

"And is that supposed to be surprising us?" Fishlegs asked, "There are many things you don't understand, even at this age."

Despite being slightly annoyed by Fishlegs' mocks, Snotlout managed to ignore him, point his finger at Eret and push an uncomfortable tone out of his mouth, "Pretty boy has been here for more than a week and still hasn't seen neither Astrid or Ruffnut. You weren't nice enough to send us airmail for support—or at least to tell us where you were! May I know why did we have to spend almost a whole day torturing our ass, relying on an old stupid scent to guide us to Hiccup, so that we could find the girls, when you could have been kind enough to tell us your damn location?!"

"Simply, because there are no dragons in this island." Eret glared back at Snotlout, "Fig—"

"Wait, what?" Tuffnut cuts Eret's words off short. Abruptly halting his steps, causing Rei to accidentally bump against him. "Oops, sorry Rei—" He mumbled while sending her an apologetic look as he watched how she glared at him while dusting on her shoulder and continue walking. Tuffnut then shook his head and continued walking as well, "No dragons? What kind of place is this?"

"Not just this island." Hiccup says, "Toothless and I didn't spot any dragons on the islands we searched before coming here."

"Are you serious?" Tuffnut asks, "No dragons? Not one little Speedstinger? Baby Whispering Deaths maybe? How about a Thunderpede? No Thunderpede?"

"No." Eret says, "Just us and believe me, there were times when I wanted to return to Berk and get support but my urges to investigate the place further nonstop got stronger than the desire to be assisted."

"You said that you found a tower," Hiccup speaks, "And that you didn't want to blast it off, right?"

"Yes." Eret affirms, "I don't think it's the best choice if we do. What if there is actually someone down there? What if by destroying it, we hurt someone?"

"Or maybe, it's a trap and whoever is down there wants us to do just that." Hiccup mumbles more to himself. But his hopes were merely destroyed when Snotlout opened his big mouth again,

"Or," Snotlout says, "What if Ruffnut and Astrid were the ones trapped down there and you just ruined any chances of them being alive by waiting so damn long!?" growls at Hiccup, "Makes more sense than the inane shit that is coming out of your mouth right now." Makes a thinner toned voice, as if impersonating Hiccup's, "Patience guys, patience. The girls know how to take care of themselves, we should be there soon." Scoffs and spits to the ground, "Yeaaaah, right."

"You talk as if you don't know Astrid, or Ruffnut." Hiccup said. Already seeming annoyed. "Didn't you say Ruffnut was your honey-poo or something like that? Then, why not give her a shot of trust and believe that she is alright? Is it really that hard for you to do something as simple as that?"

"And what makes you think I don't trust her?" Snotlout snaps.

"Well, your attitude does." Hiccup says.

Balling his hands into fists, Snotlout clenched his jaw and hurried to reach his cousin. Standing in front of him and pushing his left palm against his chest to stop him from moving any further, Snotlout opened his mouth to say more when Eret's voice squeezed in from a short distance. "There it is." While standing on the cliff's edge, pointing down.

Hiccup moved away from Snotlout and stood next to Eret. "Impeccable timing." He thought. Raising a brow at what his eyes were seeing.

Down below, there was a landslide where only half of a stoned tower stood out. Unlike any other landslide they have seen before, this one looked more like a brown carpet with big stones all over it. A small elevation from the surrounding level.

"Hm, I see what you mean, Eret." Hiccup spoke. Gently rubbing his chin as he skimmed the ground below. Seeing how only half of the tower stood out, it was indeed challenging since no one knew what to expect from what was inside. Blasting it off would be far too risky "even if it sounded to be the easiest and fastest way to get in, sometimes, we should understand that what we call easy can bring us a lot of trouble.

"Um, Hiccup?" Fishlegs stepped in, resting a hand on Hiccup's arm to have his attention. When he did, without even bothering to look back at his chief and friend, Fishlegs continued, "Take a look at the mountain of dirt and rocks. Doesn't it look like it has some sort of pattern for being an act made by nature alone?"

Taking in his friend's advice, Hiccup glanced back down at the landslide. Now able to see what he couldn't a few seconds ago.

Indeed, there was a pattern. The rocks looked like they were placed there instead of simply fall down from another mountain. "Do



you think someone actually did that?" Hiccup asked.

"Not sure. But it seems like this mountain of dirt and rocks, was man-made." Fishlegs said.

"I say," Eret speaks, "that there is an underground castle down there."

"Perhaps." Hiccup agrees. "But," Frowns down at the view, somewhat troubled by the thought of it, "Why would someone cause a landslide or bury an entire castle on the first place?"

Tuffnut shrugs, "Meh, there could be many reasons." Raises his left hand up to his face-level and starts counting on his fingers as he continued speaking, "hiding from unwanted guests, refuge, escaping from law, protection from intruders, hidden treasuresâ€|"

"But why leave half of a tower exposed?" Snotlout asks, "Pfft, how moronic. If they wanted to hide something, then they would have been smart enough to bury the entire castle, right?"

"Well, maybe they ran out of big rocks!" Tuffnut suggests,

"Hm, good point Tuff." Snotlout says while rubbing on his chin. A hint of sarcasm in his voice. "Maybe they should have asked you for some more rocks since your head is so full of them!"

Tuffnut gasped in surprise. Both of his hands went up to his head, "There are rocks inside my head?! Awesome! But how can I take one out?" Glances back at Rei, "Rei, quick! Give me your knife!"

Rei crossed her arms over her chest and simply shook her head in response.

"Anyway," Snotlout spoke up, "This is an island. How can they possibly run out of rocks?"

"Maybe not rocks." Hiccup mumbles. "Time."

Feeling the silence that suddenly took over them at that moment made Hiccup realize that everyone's eyes were once again, on him. He then turned around to face them.

As if reading his thoughts, Eret stepped closer to his chief, "Skullcrusher and I started making a tunnel that would take us straight into the castle. It has taken us this long since we are just one man and his dragon. But I believe we are getting pretty close."

"Where is this tunnel you speak of?" Hiccup asks.

"Further south from here." Eret said.

Snotlout hisses, "And why didn't you mention that earlier!?"

Ignoring his cousin's complains, Hiccup started to walk back into the woods from where they came from. Toothless and Stormfly followed shortly behind. "Let's get to work then. Hopefully, we can finish the tunnel before sundown." halts his steps and turns on his heel to face

them, "Okay gang, bring your axes together. We are going to do some digging."

Long hours were spent digging the tunnel that took them closer to the underground castle. It had gotten so hot in there, that Snotlout and Eret ended up taking their vests off.

Far too focused in digging, no words escaped Hiccup's lips. Not once.

Fishlegs would glance back at Hiccup every now and then. Worried, that Hiccup's wound would bother him for bending and stretching too much. To his very own surprise, Hiccup tried his best to dig as carefully as possible.

It was a relief. Fishlegs very well knew that no matter how far Hiccup's mind would drift off, his senses for responsibility and care would never go off. "It was, one of the best qualities in him.

Still, Fishlegs couldn't help to hope that they would find the girls soon. More than anything else, he wished that everyone was safe. Next thing he knew, he was standing right by Hiccup's side. Trying to catch a glimpse of his face, "Hiccup?"

"Hm?"

"Did you get \_any\_ \_sleep\_ last night?" Fishlegs asks. Hoping to hear an affirmative answer. Unfortunately, all he got was the movement of his friend's head to the sides.

"Nightmares?" Fishlegs asked. Obviously trying to get his friend to at least talk some more. Meanwhile, he continued digging.

Even though his back was now to Hiccup, he could hear his friend's long sigh be released before "finally" hearing his voice. "Even nightmares wouldn't be as bad as having to stay up all night long. At least they let you get some rest."

"Do you think something bad happened to them?" Fishlegs asked.

"Not really. \_I know\_ they are still alive, that is." pauses, having to drop his arms to his sides so he could stretch his neck side to side. "It's just this tight feeling of someone wanting to hurt Astrid, the one that doesn't seem to loosen it's grip on me for the past few days. Kinda strange, but alarming at the same time. Other than that, part of me also believes that she is just waiting to be found."

"What makes you think that she could be \_waiting\_ to be found, \_when\_ we all know Astrid is the best at survival skills?" Fishlegs asks.

"Because if she wasn't, then she would have done everything in her knowledge to have us know where she is." Hiccup responds.

"Sorry to stick my butt in, but" Rei speaks, turning to face Hiccup and Fishlegs. "Why would anyone want to hurt this Astrid you speak of? I mean, what is she to an enemy?"

"Only the best bait any enemy of Hiccup would have." Fishlegs responded. "Being Hiccup's wife and closest human friend, she becomes an easy target. If not her, then Toothless."

"But thenâ€"

"Whoa, whoa. Hold it in a second." Snotlout cut Rei's words off short. "Now that you mention it that way, hasn't it occurred to you that maybe while in battle, someone threatened her into doing something way worse to us and as a result she offered herself just so no one else would get involved? I mean, it has already happened before, hasn't it?"

At the sound of Snotlout's suggestion, Eret's arm stopped over his head. Slowly, he turned to look at Snotlout, Fishlegs, Hiccup and Rei.

Fishlegs' head tilted to the side in wonder and Rei's face remained expressionless.

Finally, Hiccup broke the silence, "What makes you say that, Snotlout?"

Snotlout shrugs a shoulder, "Well, you know. Wouldn't be the first time Astrid jumps in to protect the people she cares about."

"You just said it yourself, Snotlout," Hiccup frowns, clearly starting to get even more irritated at how things were turning into, "She did it to protect us all. Why is this onto discussion right now?"

"Even if what Snotlout says is true," Fishlegs quickly stepped in. Knowing that it wasn't exactly the best time for Snotlout to tick on one of Hiccup's nerves. "...then she would have at least sent us a signal or something." Fishlegs said. "She's not the kind of person that leaves without saying a word to no one. Especially to Hiccup."

"And she wouldn't leave us all just like that, either." Hiccup added. Turns around, draws the axe back and starts to dig again, "Get back to work, Snotlout. Now is not the time to discuss this."

I wonder if he's just doing this to toy with me...Wouldn't be the first time, yet I am seriously not in the best mood to deal with this.â€"Hiccup thought.

"Just think about it." Snotlout hurried in. "Osch said he wouldn't declare war on us if Astrid married Billus. She accepted, but then you two appeared to be married without even knowing it." Points his axe at Hiccup. "The Hollibusians attacked us, and she disappeared. Days later, here we are searching until our bones break. Doesn't any of that seem strange to you?"

"Hate to admit it, but Snotlout might have a point here." Fishlegs said.

Snotlout's eyes widened in shock, "Wait, I do?!"

Fishlegs turns to Hiccup, "Of all the missing people, why Astrid?"

"Things wouldn't have been so bad if only mister chief here would be more alert on where his allies are." Snoutlout said.

Hiccup's hand dropped the axe to the ground. Turning on his heels and balling his hands into fists, the young chief took in a deep breath and stepped forward. Opening his now shaking lips to set free the kind of words that would pierce even the most stubborn Viking's heart. "What are you insinuating? That I show little care?"

Hiccup digs his right hand into his right thigh's pocket and pulls out a perfectly folded map. Waves the map at his cousin, "I crossed out every island Toothless and I have come across from the map for the past week. Hoping that I don't have to check out yet another one." Clears throat, trying as hard as he could to control the ache in his chest that had gradually started to grow stronger. "Not too long ago, I lost my father. Snotlout, the thought of pushing a ship into the open sea with Astrid's axe in it, terrifies me deep down to the bone and it is exactly why I rather keep believing that she is alive and only waiting to be found." pauses to swallow heavily, "Don't you dare question my care for Astrid because you have no idea how it feels like to be connected to someone as much as a man is to his wife especially when he cares this much for her. Now stop talking nonsense, and dig."

Hearing him, Snotlout's teeth began to slightly chew on his inner cheeks. Probably, his mouth had run off way further than usual. Not knowing what to say, his own body responded involuntarily when his eyes fell to the ground at his left and his lungs released a low breath. "I...Hiccupâ€"

Eret cleared his throat aloud as to catch everyone's full attention, "Listen, all. Whatever possible theories you might have in mind, discard the thought Astrid might have left with the Hollibusians in order to keep peace on Berk." Glaring down at each and every one of them, he added, "She was trying to flee from the shapeshifters. They caught her in and disappeared with her. That's all there is."

"I don't think arguing about it will get us anywhere good." Tuffnut said.

"Right," Eret agreed. "If we are searching for someone, we must do it with a positive attitude instead of filling our heads with rotten what ifs."

"I wholeheartedly agree with Eret here." Hiccup stepped in. "We have gotten this far already. Time we spend creating a whole hypothesis on how things really happened and how are things now, is time we keep on wasting."

Just then, their conversation had been put into a permanent stop when Toothless' low growls stole Hiccup's attention from the rest of the gang. When the boy walked over to his dragon, he noticed that the Night Fury was staring suspiciously at the wall of dirt in front of him.

"What is it, bud?" Hiccup asks.

Toothless growled even deeper. Hiccup glanced back at the wall and laid his hand against it. "Hm, it's a lot moister than the other two

walls on either side of us."

"Allow me, chief." Eret said while rubbing a hand against the wall as well. Seconds later, he pulled back and drew his axe back, then started to dig into the wall. About seven tries later, his axe bounced against something hard. He threw the axe to the ground and started to scratch the wall with his own hands. Throwing chunks of dirt to the ground.

Hiccup soon joined in and so did Fishlegs, Snotlout and Tuffnut. Rei, on the other hand, stayed back with both of her arms crossed and an unpleasant expression on her face.

Soon, a stonewall was revealed.

"We found it!" Hiccup said.

"Unbelievable!" Fishlegs said while sticking his ear against the stone as if to try and listen to what could be on the other side. "An underground castle. This is incredible!"

"Do you hear anything?" Hiccup asks.

"No..." Fishlegs said.

Hiccup took a grip on Fishlegs' arm and pulled him away from the stonewall. "Good. Then, move out of the way."

As soon as Eret, Tuffnut, Rei, Snotlout, Fishlegs, and Hiccup were at a considerable distance from the stonewall, Hiccup nodded down at Toothless. "Do your thing, bud."

Toothless took in a deep breath as the insides of his mouth glowed a bright purple and his shoulders were brought back. Shooting once at the stonewall, all riders turned away and covered their heads while the rocks fell into tiny pieces.

Once the smoke was finally gone, Hiccup found Toothless' head and rubbed it affectionately, "Nice one, bud. Thanks."

Toothless growled back at his rider in pure satisfaction before walking into the castle first.

The place was deserted. Dark. Their steps echoed through the eternal hallway they encountered. Fishlegs searched in his and Meatlug's supply bag and pulled out what seemed to be a torch. He asked Meatlug to spit down a gentle amount of lava on it so it would be lit.

Fishlegs gave Hiccup the torch and then pulled another one from the supply bag. He asked Meatlug to lit it as well and then turned back to face his friends, "Sorry about that. I could only pack two torches. Whenever me and Meatlug travel, there are other things that fall into the category of priorities."

"Two is more than enough, Fishlegs. Thanks." Hiccup said as he continued walking. Gazing at his surroundings, "Who would bury down an entire castle?"

"The real question would be, \_why\_?" Fishlegs said.

"Someone who didn't want their prisoners to be found." Eret said. The gang abruptly stopped walking when Eret stretched a hand to block their way. He leaned back against the wall and glanced down at what looked like a spiral stairway.

"Wait, are we at the top of the stairs?" Snotlout asked while glancing up. Trying to find an answer to what was obvious to all of them. "Seriously? In an underground castle? Are you kidding me!?"

"Seems like it." Hiccup said. Starting to climb down the stairs. "Everyone, stay close."

"Don't know about you, but those are a lot of steps that seem to go straight down to Hel." Tuffnut said, climbing on Belch's neck. "So I'm using the fastest and painless way down." Looks back at Rei, "Rei, you can ride Barf if you like." Waggles eyebrows at her.

Rei shrugged and swung her leg over Barf's neck, sitting on the saddle and holding onto his horns.

"The obvious shouldn't be stated," Hiccup chuckled while climbing on Toothless' back, "But thank you for pointing that out, Tuff."

"Just because we have a comfortable amount of space for us to fly down there, doesn't mean we can let our guard down." Fishlegs said, "Remember, anything can be waiting for us down there."

"Yeah, yeah. We know that already." Snotlout says, "Now quit wasting more time." he and Hookfang got ahead of the others and started to carefully glide down the wide stairway.

Shortly after Snotlout and Hookfang left, the others joined. Only to find themselves in a much bigger hallway with closed wooden doors on either side of them.

"What is behind those doors?" Hiccup asked while getting off Toothless' back.

Toothless gave him a light shrug and spit a quick plasma blast at one of the doors.

"Heh, the intrigue isn't leaving you alone, is it?" Hiccup mocked his dragon.

Seeing how Toothless simply giggled back at him, Hiccup walked further and peeked inside the room. "What the..."

His eyes found a room with a human skeleton laying on the floor. The skeleton's wrists were shackled to the wall and so where it's legs.

A queasy feeling crawled up Hiccup's legs, reached his chest, wrapped around his heart and squeezed it tight enough for his breath to be taken away for a quick second. "What kind of primitive beast would do this to someone?"

"Uh, Hiccup?" Fishlegs' voice pulled Hiccup's attention from the cell. He shook his shoulders in fright and then walked back to where

Fishlegs and the others stood.

Eret, Snotlout, Tuffnut, Rei, and Fishlegs were standing by now open doors on either side of the hallway. "Seems like we are in a dungeon." Fishlegs said.

"Now I'm seriously creeped out." Snotlout said, "Hope to not find the girls in this place."

"I have to agree with you, Snotlout." Hiccup said. Great part of him was eager to see what was inside the underground castle. To not have to pull out his map again and cross out another island. However, after seeing what was inside the cell, his mind wouldn't stop sending Odin short prayers for Astrid to not be in this godforsaken place.

"Gruaah!" Suddenly, Stormfly started to dash forward.

Toothless sent a call back at her but seeing how she wouldn't stop even after hearing him, he soon started to follow her.

"Toothless, wait!" Hiccup called. Also running after his dragon.

Startled, Fishlegs rose his hand up while running after his friend, "H-Hiccup! You're not supposed to be running yet!"

When everyone finally caught up with the sky-blue Deadly Nadder and Night Fury, they were now standing in a round-cell big enough to have at least six prisoners rotting inside.

Hiccup walked further into the cell and as he glanced to his sides in curiosity, he spotted a pair of chains that hung from the wall and a bowl of untouched water on the floor. The shackles were broken open and there were blood stains on them.

Stormfly squawked again and stomped past Hiccup. When he turned to her, and moved his eyes down by the Deadly Nadder's feet, he saw another pair of chains that hung from the wall "only a lot shorter than the previous ones" and yet another pair that were being held by the floor itself.

Kneeling by the chains to get a better look at them, he noticed that these shackles also had stains of blood all over them. The only difference, was that the bloodstains on these shackles, were a lot darker and more dense than the ones on the other chains. "Whoever was being kept here, didn't seem to stop struggling." His eyes moved down to the ground again, "There is blood everywhere..." He mumbled. Moving his torch closer to the ground, seeing more bloodstains on the stoned floors.

Closing his eyes, Hiccup took in a deep breath as he continued to send Odin some more worthless inner prayers before opening them once again at the sound of Toothless' curious groan. By the time the boy brought his attention back to his dragon, his loyal companion was already by his side.

Toothless sent Hiccup an uneasy stare before looking back down at the ground.

Hiccup rose a brow and brought the torch closer to where Toothless was looking at, "What do you see, bud?"

Golden strands of hair laid on the floor. Hiccup's hand found one of them and picked it up. He carefully eyed it and then let go of it. "It could be \_anyone's.\_"

Unsure of it, Toothless moved his head closer to his rider. Hiccup's head tilted to the side. Eyes beginning to shine with the reflection of water building up. "A-Anyone's." At this point, his voice was barely able to leave his vocal cords. The ache that strangled his heart had begun to take place within his chest.

To think, \_Astrid's body\_ could have been the one chained to the wall and floor like a mad beast, angered him. But no other feeling was much stronger than the fear of it being \_actually true.\_ Thinking that this was \_her\_ blood, instead of just any other prisoner, forced his knees to fail with a slight shake and have his bum slowly touch the ground.

\_This, is not hers.\_"He thought. "No. She is safe. Waiting to be found. She was never here to begin with.\_"

Even while trying to change his thoughts, the little evidence he was facing screamed for him not to lie to himself. Strands of golden hair and bloodstains all over the place didn't confirm anything."Toothless' silence, however, \_did\_.

Seeing Stormfly sit on the floor and rest her head, looking away from the others and hiding her face behind her wing, made Hiccup's lips begin to tremble. The strong ache that took over in just seconds pushed a bitter tear out of his right eye and have it roll down his cheek. Followed by another one. And another...

"Ends here..." Eret mumbled, "Astrid's scent." His hand dropped from Skullcrusher's head and soon, the rider also lowered his head.

"Apparently my sister's scent also ends here." Tuffnut said while standing by the door, looking at Barf and Belch sniffing the chains on the other side of the room.

"So, Ruffnut and Astrid really were trapped in the same cell?" Snotlout asked. Points at the chains by the water bowl, "Ruffnut was here," Turns and points at Hiccup's direction, "And Astrid was there?"

"They \_have\_ to be somewhere else." The gang heard Hiccup whisper. "\_They have to\_." Shaky voice, "I mean, if something really happened to Astrid or Ruffnut, then their bodies would still be here."

"I see you still don't give yourself a rest from all the kindness and dedication to your own allies. Don't you find it exhausting?"

A rather familiar voice made all the dragons stand straight and show their incisors at the one person they hated with all of their dragon guts.

Toothless immediately moved in front of Hiccup and growled up at the red-haired warrior that walked past the other riders and stood just a



few feet from them with both hands held behind his back.

"\_Dagur\_." Hiccup said while standing back on his feet, "\_You\_ are behind this?"

"That's right, dear brother." Extends his arms up while slightly turning to show off the cell, "What do you think? Do you like my new installations? I kinda feel a little bit claustrophobic without any window down here, though. Which is why I barely even come down here at all andâ€" "

"What are you up to, Dagur?" Hiccup cut Dagur's babble off short. Stepping forward, "What are you trying to get from all of this?"

"Funny how you don't ask about your beautiful milady first." Dagur said. "After all, you did go through all the trouble to find her. Too bad you came in too late. Few days ago, and you would have found her woundless."

Hiccup's eyes widened, "What have you done to Astrid?"

"Me?" Dagur grins. Digs his hand into his left-thigh-pocket and pulls out Astrid's forehead-band. Inhales deep and throws the band at Hiccupâ€"who immediately caught it. "Oh, hohohoo. All kinds of things, must I assure you."

Before Hiccup could even open his mouth to let out words that would most likely reveal his built-up anger, Stormfly growled aloud and flipped her tail upwards. A single spine darted forward and past Dagur's arm. Leaving a long scratch on his flesh that soon revealed a few fainted droplets of blood.

"Ha! Missed!" Dagur hissed at the Deadly Nadder.

"She never misses." Hiccup said. Letting him know that Stormfly only did that to have him back off. "I'll ask you this once more, Dagur. Where is Astrid?"

"And my sister!" Tuffnut said from the other side of the cell's entrance.

"And don't you even think about lying, or else." Snotlout crossed his arms over his chest, "You'll become roasted berserker for once and all."

"Why do I even need to lie about anything?" Dagur shrugged, "The evidence is right here. Under your nose!" Points at the ground by Hiccup and Toothless' feet.

"Really?" Snotlout said. "Because, I see nothing more than oxidized chains in a gloomy cell. That's all."

"Did you keep both Berkians imprisoned here?" Eret asked.

Dagur tilted his head to the side, then looked back at Hiccup and pointed his thumb at Eret. "New friend? You finally welcome in much worthier warriors, huh?" Mocks, "Anyway, anything could be better than the gang of clowns you have."

"Remind me again, why is he avoiding our questions?" Snotlout growled within, then turns back to glance at Hookfang—who was outside of the cell with the rest of the dragons, Tuffnut, and Rei. "Hookfang, I think he needs a reminder on who has the flames in here. Let's put some melted Nightmare glory over his deranged ass."

"Toothless, be ready." Hiccup said. Willing to let anything happen if Dagur continued refusing to cooperate the nice way. "Dagur, where did you take Astrid?"

"As I said, I believe there is enough evidence in this room to answer your question. Words will only become useless." Dagur said. He shrugged his shoulders and turned his back to Hiccup. Halfway, he halted his steps and glanced over his shoulders at him, "Oh, and if I were you, I wouldn't try to leave now. That is, if you don't mind being killed by some of my men." Snorts, "Even after all these years, you still succeed in surprising me, Hiccup. Always willing to jump into the wolf's mouth without thinking about it twice." Releases a sarcastic sigh, "Shame." Shrugs, "Oh well, seems like you enjoy being suicidal."

"Not if we get rid of you first." Snotlout said as Toothless inhaled deep and a bright blue color glowed at the back of his throat. Stormfly's tail was brought up. "Your head must be filled with gas if you thought coming in here without backup would be a good idea."

"Coming in like this only proves his naiveness." Dagur points at Hiccup. "But I enjoy having you here. So much, it feels like a dream that has finally come true. Agony suits you, brother. You see, brother Hiccup, there are some other interesting things that you should know of as soon as possible. Like, how much fun Astrid and I—"

Dagur's words were cut off short when a loud noise bounced against the stoned walls and the ground began to shake.

"What's happening?" Rei asked while holding onto Barf's neck and looking at Tuffnut who held onto Belch's neck.

The ground split in half and soon all of the riders, their dragons, and Dagur had found themselves falling down a massive hole.

Screaming and praying to the gods for mercy wasn't even an option. Seconds later, the ground beneath Dagur rose and soon his knees touched steady grounds again.

Sucked into the ground, the riders and their dragons disappeared. Leaving a clueless Dagur glancing at his surroundings with utter perplexity. "Where did everybody go?"

\* \* \*

><p>"You owe me for this." Ruffnut said.<p>

And she wasn't so far away from the truth. Yet again, it was no one's fault. Not hers, not Astrid's—not anyone's fault. Last night, when Astrid and Ruffnut walked through the dark forest far away from

the Sanctuary, and in search for a dragon to ride on until finding their way back home, they never expected to face the kind of consequences that were waiting for them as soon as they hopped on one.

Flying straight up to the dark skies—both on a Timberjack—, the skittish creature from the Sharp Class surprised the young Vikings when its wings began to fail in midair and a strong force that came out of nowhere pushed them back down into the ground.

Quickly spiraling down and abruptly crashing against the ground hard enough to almost break the dragon's large jawline, its cries of agony soon startled the people from the nearest village.

Yet, neither of the two Vikings hesitated in aiding the suffering creature. While Ruffnut stayed by the dragon, holding its chin still to prevent more fractures, Astrid dashed to the nearest river to get some water.

Minutes after Astrid returned from the river with a sack of water, Daria and Radames appeared before them.

Of course, a sack of water was helpless next to what Radames did. The man rose both of his hands up in the air, where light blue threads began to emerge from his palms and quickly spiraled down, finding the dragon and then switching their color to a bright yellow before being sucked into the dragon's nostrils.

Next thing the two Viking ladies knew, was that the Timberjack had become stronger than ever before. He stood from the ground, stretched its wings, bowed down at Radames, and then took off to the skies.

After that, Astrid didn't find the desire to say another word to Radames or Daria—that it wasn't of gratitude for healing the dragon, of course.

The only way Ruffnut figured to relieve the tension between them, was by volunteering herself and Astrid to get some water from the nearest well and fruits for the banquet. Without thinking it twice, Daria poofed two empty wooden buckets, and then she and her brother walked back in direction to the mansion.

Several hours later, Ruffnut and Astrid were walking back from the well. Ruffnut carried a bucket full of water while Astrid carried a bucket full of peaches.

"You owe me for this." Ruffnut repeated.

"Ruff, you already said that." Astrid said. Tired of hearing the same thing over and over again ever since they arrived the well and all the way back. "Should have known something like this could happen."

"\_Of course\_ it would happen. After all, Daria \_did\_ warn us about this." Frowns back at her, "No one leaves this place unless the Foreverwing decides otherwise. Did the long beauty sleep knock you out of your senses completely?"

"You're overreacting." Astrid said, "Besides, I wonder what's so

special about this gigantic dragon that makes it so that we wouldn't be able to leave."

Ruffnut scoffed, "Yeah, I'm the one overreacting. I am so full of patience that I even almost ripped my own wrists out by restlessly pulling from titanium made chains. I have been sooo blessed with serenity that insisted into committing double suicide by hopping on a Timberjack's back and then be forced back down into the ground."

"None of it was my fault, you know." Astrid snapped back. Slightly annoyed by her friend's sudden sarcastic tone.

"Uh, yeah it was." Ruffnut spat. Rolling her eyes, "Serves you right for being hardheaded. The only detail that has me steaming over my own breeches, is the fact that I have had to pay the price along with you."

"Hey, I know you're angry for all that's been happening to us, especially when you clearly have nothing to do with any of this. It is me, the one that should be stuck down here alone. It is me, the one that should be spitting curses all over the place. Yet, I am not. Even if I have much more anger within me than what you can ever possibly imagine, the case right now, is that I am not alone in this. Unfortunately for you, you were also brought into this mess. Instead of fighting about it, why don't we just focus on the fact that by being in this together, we can at least figure out a way to manage a solution in getting us out of here without risking our lives again?"

Listening to Astrid pour down all that had been stuck in her throat for almost half a day, Ruffnut remained silent for a few more seconds. Submerging herself in deep thought. Then, she just shrugged a shoulder and continued walking. "True." Her tone a lot less tense, "But my point, is that a little chill every once in a while wouldn't kill you. Now, would it?"

Astrid sighed aloud. Dropping both shoulders and stretching her neck gently to the sides before continuing her walk a little after Ruffnut. "No. It wouldn't. I just... I don't think I'm able to concentrate on anything other than that."

Ruffnut rose a brow, "Anything, other than what exactly?"

"Getting back to Berk." Astrid said.

"What do you think waits for us in Berk? Honestly, I don't think Bertha went back there." Ruffnut said.

"Even if she went someplace else, or not, Hiccup is in Berk. I can't bare the thought of our child being born without him even knowing the possibility of its existence." Pauses, "I can't allow that..."

At the moment, Bertha wasn't exactly the main character in Astrid's mind. Hiccup, was. Wondering, how is he doing? where is he at? and is he alright or not?

According to Daria, the baby was okay. But, Astrid wouldn't be a hundred percent convinced about it, not until seeing her belly grow

and show her that she actually has a child to take care of. To be honest, the thought of it frightened her. But, not as much as not being able to see Hiccup one more time, and tell him everything he has been missing lately.

The sudden silence made Ruffnut uncomfortable enough to become curious on what exactly was crossing her friend's mind. She took in a deep breath and right after letting it go, she said "Hey, why don't scoâ€"

\_GROUUUUN...\_

Ruffnut's words were cut off short when a sudden grumble coming from the earth beneath them startled them.

"Woah, I think I might have passed on too many gulps of mead down my throat last night. I kinda hear the ground groaning." Gasps, "And it's shaking too!"

"It wasn't the mead. The ground is shaking. Only not enough to have us lose our balance. Stay put and whatever you do, don't lower your guard." Astrid said.

But just as when both Ruffnut and Astrid thought that they would be forced to drop the buckets to the ground and fall on their knees, the ground stopped moving and soon there was silence once again.

Both Vikings studied their surroundings before staring back at each other in utter confusion.

"The hel just happened here?" Ruffnut asked.

"Not sure." Astrid said. "Let's move on."

"Roger that." Ruffnut said.

\_What was that all about?\_â€"Astrid thoughtâ€"\_an earthquake is much stronger than this, so it couldn't be it. What ifâ€"\_

"Squawk! Squawk!"

"What was that!?" Ruffnut asked. Moving her head side to side. Eyes wide. "A dragon? Did you hear it?"

"I heard." Astrid said. The sound of a dragon's squawks growing louder and louder by the second made both Vikings take a step back and grip tighter on their buckets. Just then, Astrid's shoulders moved down and her brows rose as soon as she realized, that those dragon squawks weren't just any dragon's. No, they were far more familiar than they thought. But, could it be?

"Storm..." Gags, "Storm...fly?" Turns around, eyes widening as they caught sight of a beautiful sky-blue Deadly Nadder stomping toward them. "Stormfly!"

Her hands dropped the bucket of peaches to the side and her legs were soon taking her to the dragon. Silently praying that this isn't some kind of illusion, Astrid Hofferson was soon cocooned by her most loyal companion.

The scales of the Deadly Nadder felt warm, as if she had just traveled back home in the blink of an eye. Hearing Stormfly's gentle groans, made her want to believe that this wasn't just any kind of illusion. No, this was by far, \_the best illusion she has had in days.\_

"Great, it's official now." Ruffnut sighed, "We've finally gone looney enough to see Stormfly here." Glances up at the skies, "Thank you, Helheim. Thank you very much!"

"Groooou!?"

Ruffnut's complains to the god of the underworld were merely interrupted by another familiar dragon groan. Only this one, sounded a little deeper and pretty much preoccupied. When the female twin tilted her head to the side, and tried to catch what was long feet behind Stormfly and Astrid's circle of reconciliation, her eyes opened wide and her jaw dropped. "No way..."

A startled Night Fury was skipping over the boulders through the forest until it got close enough to the Deadly Nadder, as to slow down his pace. Behind him, followed a red Monstrous Nightmare, a green Hideous Zippleback, a red and green Rumblehorn, and a brown Gronckle.

"Such a bad habit of going on and forget about the ones that give them food and shelter regularly." Snotlout's voice could be heard from the distance.

"You very well know that they can take better care of themselves than what we can." Fishlegs' voice.

"Still, he doesn't have to be so ungrateful." Snotlout responded.

"Would you two keep it down?" Eret muttered.

\_Snotlout, Fishlegs, and Eret's voice.\_"Astrid thought. Still refusing to pull away from her dragon's cocoon and let sunlight intrude and sting on her eyes once again."\_This has to be by far, the most amazing mind playing trick I have ever had. Stormfly's warmth feels so real, I can't bring myself to pull away, and open my eyes to face reality. A reality I have grown to hate with all my guts in just a few days. Yet, there is one thing missing from this illusion"â€|One thing. One that I"â€|\_

"Astrid?"

\_What was that!?"â€|Astrid gasps against her dragon's belly."â€|\_Sounds like, Hiccup's voice. No, it can't be."â€|Snuggles more against Stormfly's belly"â€|\_Now I can hear his voice too. Might seem nuts, but I don't ever want this illusion to stop."â€|Sighs"â€|\_One more time. Just, one more. Please, say my name again. Just once"â€|\_

"Astrid?"

There it was! Her name was called again. Only this time, Hiccup's voice sounded closer. A lot closer. Enough for Stormfly to lowly growl, gently spread her wings and push herself away from her

rider.

Astrid refused to let go, at first. But Stormfly was also quite the insisting-type. When they were at a considerate distance from each other, Astrid's inner cheeks sunk into the middle of her mouth and soon her molars were chewing on them.

"Astrid." Hiccup's voice now sounded less stressed, with a lesser amount of confusion and hope all mixed in like a sweet vanilla latte. He was close. Only five feet from her. His eyes searched her all over, and noticed that she still refused to open her eyes.  
"Astridâ€|"

With every step he made forward, his heartbeat increased. Banging hard against his chest. Almost as if it were going to soon break free from his ribcage. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. But after being sucked into a deep hole that apparently had taken them into a completely different placeâ€"a place beyond their understandingâ€"there wasn't exactly that much as to not believe.

To his surprise. She looked perfectly well. Clean. She had a white cloak keeping her warm. Her hair was nicely brushed. The color of her cheeks seemed even flusher than the last time he saw her. Her lips were also a little darker. She was, as beautiful as he had been picturing her in his dreamsâ€"in his thoughts for several days.

Silence, was the key. For Astrid's eyes finally began to slowly open. Only to encounter the image she had been trying so hard not to forget. However, this image, was a little different from what she had remembered. The Hiccup that stood right in front of her, seemed desperate, shockedâ€"completely restless.

His maroon tunic looked as if someone had splashed it with balls of dirt, gripped on it and slightly tear the ends of its sleeves. There was also dirt on his head, his cheeks, and sides of neck. His lips were dark violet. As if he had been fighting with a terrible dream in his sleep and mutilated his lips for hours as a result. His eyes, instead of being as bright as the most precious emerald in the entire Planet Earth, they were being clouded by the scarlet red that took over the eyeball.

Had he been crying?â€"she thoughtâ€"but, what for? People in our dreams don't usually cry. Dreams are supposed to be comforting, right? Why does he look like this? So sad, so...messed up?

It was then, that her heart began to pound at the same rhythm his was. So hard, so painful, that when her lips parted, they trembled. Now realizing that this was no dream. It could never be a dream. No, not even in her dreams has she seen things so clearly and felt the weight of life over her shoulders at the same time.

"H-Hiccup?" She whispers. Slowly stretching her right hand to him and moving one step forward. "But, howâ€" "

"Could it be true?" Hiccup whispers, also taking one step forward and stretching his right hand, surprising himself on how real it all felt as soon as his fingers touched her upper arm. Grasping on her, his eyes darted back to hers with one quick gasp.

Real, or unreal, nothing could stop his impulses on immediately pulling her in and cage her in his arms.

Hands crawling up his back and pulling him tighter against her, clearing away all possible doubt on this moment, their breaths finally joined. Her right hand found his hair, dug all five fingers in and slightly stroked it.

The tip of his nose rested on the skin right between her neck and shoulder. Taking in all of her scent, forgetting about the world around them.

"Hiccup," She speaks, almost low enough for not even him to be able to hear her. A sudden giggle escaped her lungs. Having her realize that this was no dream at all. Even though she couldn't explain how the hell did he make it to her, he was indeed, holding her in his arms. "quite unusually tight, though."

With the intentions of hearing something from him, she tightened the embrace. But all she got, was a quick tighten from his arm around her waist and his other hand on the back of her neck.

"If we keep this up, we might as well end up breaking each other's bones." He "finally" said. Words mixed with a fainted laugh that only made her echo it.

"It'll be worth it." She whispers, then clicks her tongue and snuggles more against him. "Five more seconds."

"\_Ten\_..." He breathes.

"What took you so long?" She asked.

"I know. I'm sorry, I am really, \_really\_ \_sorry\_." He mumbles, "But thank Thor you're okay. For a moment, I thought you..." Gags, trying to control the sudden sting on his chest, "...I refused to believe it, but everything looked so bad I couldn't help feel like it was true that something bad had happened to you." Pauses, "that, you were"

"I am not." She cuts his words off short. Knowing exactly what he was about to say and how he wouldn't be able to spell it out even if he tried a thousand times more. "Things are going to be different now, because we are together again." Rests her chin on his shoulder and closes her eyes. Taking in a deep breath and letting it go really slowly. Relieved. "I always knew you'd find me soon enough."

"Even if you are half a world away," Moves his head back, enough to be able to find her eyes. His hand now gently resting on her cheek. "If ever be needed, I would cross the universe to find you."

Finally, he was here. With her. With their child. "A child he still didn't know of, but that didn't take away the joy that had finally been recovered. From the moment she first gave herself to her new shared life with a man "a man she loved", a small part of her felt curious as to know what it felt like to make two completely different worlds mix into one. The other part of her "the greater part" feared of that specific kind of change. Perhaps, her mind



didn't feel like that kind of change could ever be possible.

Now, things were different. Overnight, matters changed and gave a drastic turn. Which only gave her clues on what was of priority for her. The safety of their child, was all she cared about now that she knew Hiccup was alright. Now that she knew they could be together again not only as a couple, or as friendsâ€”as a team.

Carried away by the mood of just thinking about nothing else but what was going on in their hearts, the heat of their bodies once again joined in a strong embrace that had them deaf to what the world would scream around them, and blinded to what could happen at any moment. In no time, their eyes were digging into each other's depths until their necks slowly began to move forward, carefully having them close the small distance left between them.

Their warm breaths crashing together, numb eyes, and lips timidly brushing.

"Ah-heem." Hiccup and Astrid's heads bobbed to the side at the sound of Snotlout's clear-of-throat-sound, only to find their friends staring down at them with a quizzical expression pasted on their faces. "Would you two get a room?"

Astrid then gasped in realization. Looking back at Hiccup, she noticed how messed up he looked and how cold his skin actually was. She pulled away from him, unhooked her cloak and slid it off her shoulders. "Look at you. You're freezing." She whispers, "Here, take this. It'llâ€”"

"Astrid, I'm fine." Hiccup said while gently pushing her hands back. Rejecting her offer. "There's no need to give me your cloak."

"Yes, there is. Only Odin knows how long you've been like this." She said.

"Hm, since he started searching? I'd say, about more than a week ago, then counting the lack of sleep, natural refusal to food, digging into a tunnel to end up in a creepy underground castle..." Tuffnut finally nods in assurance, "Yup. About more than a week being a complete piece of shit." Smiles big.

Ruffnut chuckled, rolling her eyes, "Look whose talking of being a piece of shit." Frowns at the rest, "couldn't you delay your arrival a little longer!? I was actually enjoying my alone time without him." Points at Tuffnut.

Tuffnut crosses his arms over his chest and turns away from her, "Like I'm happy to see you. We're on the same boat here sister. Your company has never been as pleasant as the sweet taste of mom's special recipe of blueberry muffins and fresh yak milk."

Ignoring the rest, Astrid shook her head and insisted on giving her cloak to Hiccup. "Still. Hiccup, you need to stay warm. Temperature has been dropping pretty noticeably lately."

Without even letting him answer to the statement, Astrid draped the white cloak over his shoulders and hooked it closed.

"What about you?" Hiccup asked.

"I'll be fine." She said.

"Where are we, anyway?" Snotlout asked.

"Hoffnaan." Ruffnut said.

"Hooff-\_what\_?!" Tuffnut asked.

"Hoff-\_naan\_." Ruffnut corrected. "It isn't anywhere near Berk. Trust us."

"It's actually a really long story." Astrid squeezed her words in before anything else was said. "I think it's best if we just leave this conversation for a much suitable moment."

"In that case, why not lead them to the house?" A sweet female's voice that came from their far left caught their attention. When Astrid turned, she saw Radames and Daria heading toward them.

Had they been listening all this time? How long have they been around?

"How do you know they are not intruders?" Ruffnut rose a brow at them.

"Because we are certain, that everything must pass by the Foreverwing's hand before touching Hoffnaan grounds." Radames said. "If these people are here, then it means they were brought in."

"By the Foreverwing?" Astrid asked. Slightly frowning in confusion.

"Exactly." Daria said.

"Who is this Foreverwing you're speaking of?" Hiccup asked Astrid.

"Like I said, long story." Astrid said. "I promise I'll tell you everything, but now is not the right time for it."

Hiccup rose a brow at her, "And, why is that?"

Astrid sighed, turning back to him, "because, there are so many things that we need to speak of and in order to do that, we need to sit and have a timeless conversation. Right now, I don't think it's \_it\_."

Hiccup opened his mouth to argue with her point, but Daria spoke in first, "She is right. There will be enough time to sit and talk." Turns to Astrid, walking toward her. "I am guessing, this young man is your husband. Am I wrong?"

"No. You're not." Astrid said. "Daria, this is Hiccup. Chief of Berk and master dragon trainer."

Daria slightly bowed her head before him, "Pleased to meet you."

Turns to Hiccup, "Guys, meet Daria and her brother Radames. They have

been aiding us ever since we got here."

Hiccup nods. Returning the honors, "Pleasure is all mine. Thank you for looking out for our friends. If there is a way in which we can ever repay you for your immeasurable kindness, please let me know."

Daria's silence after hearing him had startled Astrid for a quick second. When she took in a deep breath to say something, Daria's face softened with another sweet smile and a gentle nod of gratitude. "I shall then take your offer and let you know when it is in need of use." Pauses, then looks back at the rest. "Allow us to show you the way to our home. Dinner time is getting closer by the hour, it is best if we scurry now." Begins to walk in direction to the mansion.

Astrid followed shortly after with Hiccup by her side. Stormfly and Toothless followed behind, and so did the rest of the gang.

For the time being, Hiccup didn't release a single word or question. He only hoped to have a few moments with just Astrid so they could talk. In private. Knowing that soon that time will eventually come, eased him. But not enough as to make the load of questions keep on building up in his head with every minute that passed.

\* \* \*

><p>Immeasurable kindness...<p>

Hiccup himself said that Daria's kindness was immeasurable. Well, Daria's, her brother's and the Foreverwing's \_of course\_. Perhaps, he said it to sound as proper as he always is with others. What he may not be realizing, is that the word \_immeasurable,\_ has had a lot of weight in it these days. Seriously, \_a lot\_ of weight.

After arriving the mansion, Daria insisted in leaving any kind of conversation between the new guests and the current guests for dinner time. To be honest, it was good at a certain point to have to leave the talking for later. That way, Astrid could have the chance to at least \_try\_ and organize her thoughts and be able to fill Hiccup in with all that has been happening to them lately.

Here she was, sitting on the couch by the end of the bed, her knees to the washing-room doorâ€"where Hiccup bathed. Both hands rested on her thighs, thumbs playing with one another, and teeth gently nibbling her lower lip.

Thoughts racing back and forth, on how was she supposed to tell him the most important part of them all.â€"Just say it, Astrid.â€"She thoughtâ€"\_Big deal. You were about to spit it out without any hesitation at all when you first learned about the news. What's the difference now?\_"

"Aside from the fact that we almost died by the hands of Dagur and Bertha in cold blood, and that there is a dragon with healing powers that practically saved our butts from getting any closer to Helheim...nothing else is different." She sarcastically muttered to herself.

\_Yet, Hiccup is here.â€"She thoughtâ€"\_Instead of staying here,

thinking and arguing with my own mind, why am I allowing my long hidden fears take over the time I should not necessarily spend talking with him, but at least, be with him? Forget the talk, I am going to prove to myself that this isn't just a part of any other of my torturous dreams.\_

Even though there was a part of her that didn't know exactly how to make the first move, the greater part of her heart seemed to have better control. Before she knew it, her feet were already standing on the floor and dragging her at a quite considerable speed towards the bathroom doors.

Abruptly halting her steps before the door, Astrid took in a deep breath and stretched her right hand. Inches from it, the golden lover-handle moved downwards and then the door was drawn open. Hiccup, was there. Holding the door open in his hand while staring down at her. Clearly not expecting to find her right at the other side of the door.

Astrid took in a deep breath and let it go while forcing a tiny smile on her lips.

Hiccup stepped forward and slowly moved to take her hands in his. Slightly gripping on them in order to force himself to believe he wasn't dreaming. He dressed in clean clothes now. A dark green tunic and dark trousers the maids had given him before they pushed him into the bathroom and made Astrid stay out and away from it while he cleaned himself up.

Without feeling the needs to say anything, Astrid took a step closer—closing the small distance that remained between them—and let go of his left hand. Her free hand, now rose to travel up his arm, on his shoulder and finally rest on his neck.

To her surprise, the confusion and shock that had taken over Hiccup's eyes ever since they once again met, had been replaced by kindness and affection. As a result, his head slowly tilted to the side, resting his cheek on her gentle touch and letting his eyes become numb to hers. "You wanted to tell me something,"

Astrid rose a brow, and just before she would open her mouth to ask him about what he was mumbling about, he added, "Before the horns of Berk were blown. You rushed down from Gothi's hut wanting to tell me something."

\_Impossible, did he not forget about that?\_—She thought, then cleared her throat, "I thought you had forgotten about it by now."

Playfully scoffs, yet his hand let go of hers to slide around her waist and have their bodies timidly grow closer. Peering into her eyes, his other hand now going to her hair, and moved her bangs to the side so he could catch a full view of her sapphire gems. "\_Never\_", would I dare forget something like that." Whispers, "You know that."

Instinctively, Astrid's face moved closer to his. Lips brushing together. His lips trapping her lower lip and then freeing it to have her push her lips against his own.

For a timeless moment, their worlds seemed equally perfect. A wonderful rush of joy flowed through their bodies until both of their hearts began to race in unison.

Stroking on his hair, Astrid's tongue made way between her lips and found their place inside Hiccup's mouth. Now and then hiding from Hiccup's until he released a chuckle and pulled her in tighter, forcing their tongues not to forget about one another for a while.

Laughing between kisses, Astrid broke their kiss and their foreheads met.

Both of Hiccup's hands moved to find her cheeks, cupping them in. Taking in low deep breaths, his wide smile turned into just a small "almost forced" grin. Remembering the reasons as to why they were at a place far away from home, and how Dagur had crossed paths with her before \_he\_ did. "What have they done to you?"

As if knives had just been pushed into her lower \_and\_ upper back at the same time, Astrid suddenly felt as if the right to speak had been stolen away from her.

\_Such a wonderful moment, ruined by the cruel reality that has taken over us for weeks.\_ "Astrid thought" \_Eternal weeks, should I dare say. But, what should I say? Where should I start? Maybe, I should begin with telling him about the baby and leave it at that.\_ \_Yeah, sounds like a way to spit out the thorns without drawing so much blood. Or, should I leave the baby part for last? Anyhow, it could" \_

"Don't hide anything." As if he could read her mind, Hiccup said interrupting her trail of thoughts. "I saw the chains," pauses, his voice sounding lower by the word, "the blood stains, and Toothless and Stormfly assured us your scent ended there." frowns, hands fall on her shoulders and slightly grip on them, "Tell me the truth. What did Dagur do to you?"

Without even thinking on daring to ask how did they make it to the dungeons and confronted Dagur, Astrid's eyes fell to the floor to her right.

Her silence didn't do any good to the pile of anxiety that had begun building up over him. He moved his face forward, searching for her eyes, but she refused to look back at him. He gave her shoulders a gentle shake, "Astrid, see? They \_must\_ have done something \_terrible\_ in order for you to act like this."

\_You're right, Hiccup\_ "Astrid thought" \_But, how can I put this into words? Feels so easy to think the words, but, why does saying them feel so impossible?\_

"Astrid, please. I need to know." Hiccup insisted. "What kind of sick things did Dagur do to you and Ruffnut?"

"Not Dagur," was the first thing Astrid's lips seemed to be able to say, still refusing to meet his eyes. "It" "It was someone else that did all the damage. Dagur barely even touched me."

"Then?" Hiccup asked, "Astrid, I need you to tell me \_now\_ what

happened in that cell."

Astrid sighed aloud, grabbing his wrists and pulling herself free from his hold. She turned on her heel and began to pace away from him. Gazing at her surroundings, trying to find a way to speak without having to feel like her world would soon collapse on her back and drag her down to the ground.

Not to be dramatic, but the facts hurt.

When she finally regained the strengths she had been praying for, she said, "When we last saw each other at the battlefield, I confronted Billus. I tried to have him give up on fighting and offered him my mercy. But then something unexpected came up in our conversation that lit my anger and Iâ€"I couldn't control what happened next." Sighs again, a considerable amount of regret in it, "I killed him by chopping his head off with my axe."

Shuddering to look back at him, Astrid received the \_go's\_ to continue speaking when she noticed how she had his full attentionâ€"along with a shocked stare. Before letting him say anything about this, she turned away and continued talking whilst pacing further away from him. "After Osch knew what I did, I felt something push my feet and force my frozen body to move. To run away. Effectively, I was being chased by strange things called shapeshifters. Then, I don't exactly remember what happened that everything went pitch black and when I finally woke up, I had my hands and ankles chained to stone."

Her feet, took her to the open doors of the terrace. Where the wind blew strong enough to have the curtains dance inwards. Her shoulder leaned against the frame, eyes getting lost in the stunning sundown view. Arms crossed over her chest. "Dagur wasn't the first one to come in. \_Someone else\_ was. That day, Ruffnut and I learned that I had been used as a toy all my life. My actions, my steps, even my decisions were being controlled by one person. One person that only wanted to stand out as the most powerful creature on the village. At first, I didn't want to believe it. But then I had no other choice but to think on what was best for me. Well, for me and the people I love. Those that mean the most to me. My people, my friends,â€"family."

Hiccup's hands surprised her by resting on her shoulders. They then slid down her arms and moved to her hips. Fingers ending up resting on her stomach as he hugged her from behind. Sending her currents of indescribable feelings through her entire body. Chin laid on her shoulder, and eyes trying to find the same spot in the sky that hers were looking at. "I'm listening." He whispers.

Letting her know he was there for her once again, holding her close, and giving her the assurance she needed to complete the missing pieces of the story.

With a poor exhale, she gave up the words, "\_Bertha Hofferson\_", was the spy we were trying to track down back on Berk. She drew the Hollibusians into our plan, she told them everything they needed to know, she was watching our every move, and she was the one who jailed Ruffnut and me in."

Feeling his hands loosen their touch on her stomach after hearing

her, made her guess that he was as shocked as she would imagine him to be. Naturally.

Slowly, she turned to face a Hiccup whose eyes had become completely lost in her image. "But, only for a second. In no time, his brows twitched and formed a frown, "Somehow, I don't feel as surprised as I think I should be." shakes head, "Don't ask me why, because I don't know the answer yet. How? How can a person do such an atrocious thing to their own daughter? I mean, that's not something someone with a heart would do. Right?"

"Hiccup, she doesn't have one." Astrid spat. As if she didn't care. As if, she had grown immune to any possible kind of affection towards Bertha.

Hearing her, Hiccup rose a brow, "Doesn't any of this bother you?"

"At first, yes." Nods, "but then, I learned there was something much more important that required my full attention."

"Like?" Hiccup asks, tilting his head to the side.

As if Frigga had taken a charcoal pencil and started to sketch a perfect smile on Astrid's lips that blew away any sign of sadness, anger, or even irritability on her, Astrid took both of Hiccup's hands in hers and gave them a light squeeze. "What I wanted to tell you back in Berk, was that I" Shakes head, releasing a quick chuckle. "we" corrects, "Hiccup, we are to"

Knock, knock, knock.

"Excuse us," Two maids opened the room door and stepped in.

Great, what now?" Astrid thought, glancing over Hiccup's shoulder to look at the maids.

"Dinner is ready. They are expecting you at the dinning room." One of the maids said.

Hiccup nodded once, "Thank you, we will be right out."

Both maids bowed their curtsy and left the room.

Hiccup turned to look back at Astrid, "You were saying?"

Astrid shook her head, letting go of his hands. "Nothing. It can wait for later."

Hiccup clicked his tongue, teasing. "How long will you keep making me wait?"

Astrid laughed, "As long as I need to in order to tell you without anymore interruptions." Teases back.

Hiccup faked a hurt expression "which she completely ignored and walked past him.

He took a hold of her arm and stopped her from walking away. Having her turn halfway to him, "Astrid,"

"Hm?"

Stands closer, "Even though I know that there are many more things to talk about, right now, there is one thing I care of the most."

Tilts head to the side, "What is?" she asks.

Hiccup's hands find hers, this time, intertwining their fingers. "We are here, standing in front of each other. Time, will soon seem endless. I'm sure of it."

Hearing him, Astrid's lips stretched into a warm smile, "I hope so." also hoping to have as much calm as he surprisingly projected.

Hiccup nods, seeing how she moved to seal the distance between them by gently planting a kiss on his lips. A kiss so small, so simple, yet powerful enough to strengthen their hopes as to soon be able to share everything their hearts desired. To remind how much love there was stored in their silent hearts. "I'm glad you're finally here." wraps arms over his shoulders, "Right now, it's the one thing that truly matters."

Hiding his face in her neck, breathing in her scent, Hiccup's arms tightened their hold around the small of her waist. No longer needing to prove to himself that she was real, and not just part of another of his dreams. No, this was Astrid. This girl here, was his Astrid. His friend, partner, wife, and lifelong companion.

Indeed, this was a moment neither of them would want to end so soon. However, the thought of eventually having extra time to share, eased their hearts enough as to send waves of patience in their souls.

When they pulled away from each other, Astrid gripped on one of his hands and started to walk to the doors. Holding each other's hands, they walked out of the room, where the two maids waited for them.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: And this is it for the crazy chapter-marathon. My eternal and sincere apologies for delaying so much, and for spamming on your inbox with the alerts. Time hasn't been kind enough with me as to sit and write these chapters. Thus I had them waiting to be proofread in the saved-box. I hope you are enjoying the story so far, I will try my best to continue it without leaving such a huge gap of time between chapters<strong>â€œ\*\*like lately. Don't know about you, but I am falling in love with this story. :) \*\*

\*\*P.s Please bare with me, be patient. I promise I will get to the rest of the chapters as soon as I can. \*\*

End  
file.